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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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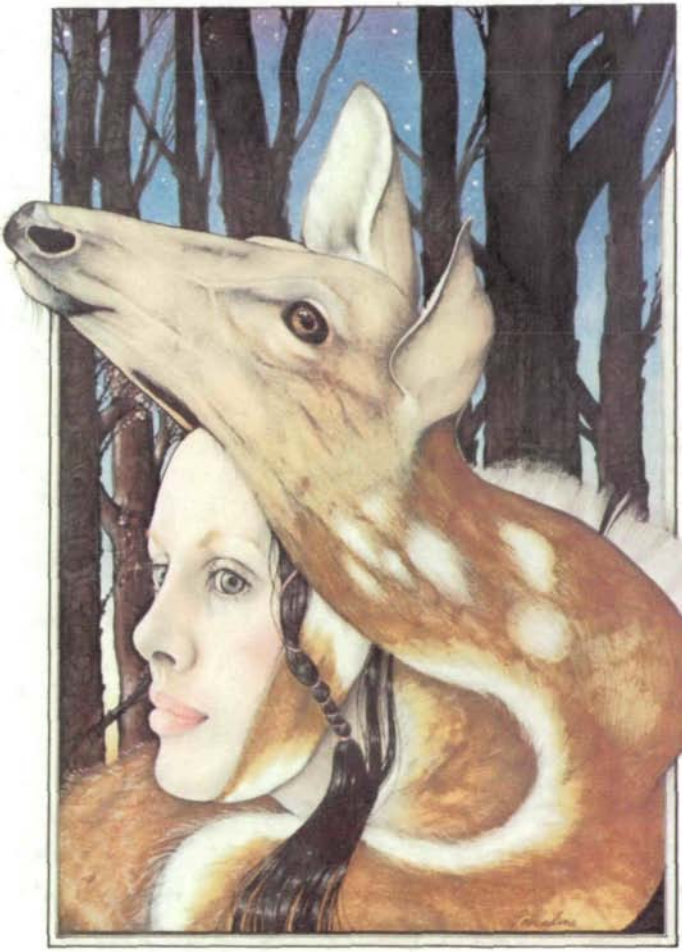

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GOLDBRICK	**EDWARD WELLEN**	**95**

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LITTLE GOETHE	**M. MENDELSOHN**	**34**

SHORT STORIES

BROTHER HART	**JANE YOLEN**	**6**
PROJECT HI-RISE	**ROBERT F. YOUNG**	**22**
CAT	**BILL PRONZINI**	**58**
SECOND CHANCE	**CHARLES V. DE VET**	**67**
HE–Y, COME ON OU–T!	**SHINICHI HOSHI**	**75**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	**ALGIS BUDRYS**	**13**
CARTOON	**GAHAN WILSON**	**33**
FILMS: *An Oddity by Homer*	**BAIRD SEARLES**	**64**
A CHECKLIST OF ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE ESSAYS		**79**
SCIENCE: *Fifty Million Big Brothers*	**ISAAC ASIMOV**	**85**

Cover by David Palladini for "Brother Hart"

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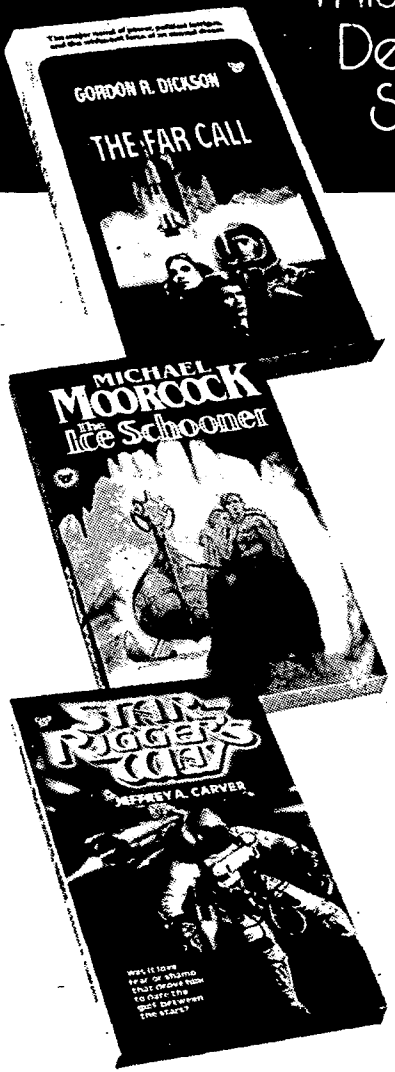

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Jane Yolen's new story is doubly welcome: for its own enchanting self and for the striking cover it got from David Palladini. The story will appear in a new collection titled DREAM WEAVER to be published in the Spring.

Brother Hart

by JANE YOLEN

Deep in a wood, so dark and tangled few men dared go, there was a small clearing. And in that clearing lived a girl and her brother hart.

By day, in his deer shape, Brother Hart would go out and forage on green grass and budlings while his sister remained at home.

But whenever dusk began, the girl Hinda would go to the edge of the clearing and call out in a high, sweet voice:

Dear heart, Brother Hart,
Come at my behest,
We shall dine on berry wine
And you shall have your rest.

Then, in his deer heart, her brother would know the day's enchantment was at an end and run swiftly home. There, at the lintel over the cottage door, he would rub between his antlers till the hide on his forehead broke bloodlessly apart. He would rub and rub further still till the brown hide skinned back along both sides and he stepped out a naked man.

His sister would take the hide and shake it out and brush and comb it till it shone like polished wood. Then she hung the hide up by the antlers beside the door, with the legs dangling down. It would hang there limp and soulless till the morning when Brother Hart donned it once again and raced off to the lowland meadows to graze.

What spell had brought them there, deep in the wood, neither could recall. The woods, the meadow, the clearing, the deer hide, the cottage door were all they knew.

Now one day in late spring, Brother Hart had gone as usual to the lowland meadows leaving Hinda at home. She had washed and scrubbed the little cottage till it was neat and clean. She had put new straw in their bedding. But as

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she stood by the window brushing out her long dark hair, an unfamiliar sound greeted her ears: a loud, harsh calling, neither bird nor jackal nor good grey wolf.

Again and again the call came. So Hinda went to the door, for she feared nothing in the wood. And who should come winded to the cottage but Brother Hart. He had no words to tell her in his deer form, but blood beaded his head like a crown. It was the first time she had ever seen him bleed. He pushed past her and collapsed, shivering, on their bed.

Hinda ran over to him and would have bathed him with her tears, but the jangling noise called out again, close and insistent. She ran to the window to see.

There was a man outside in the clearing. At least she thought it was a man. Yet he did not look like Brother Hart, who was the only man she knew.

He was large where Brother Hart was slim. He was fair where Brother Hart was dark. He was hairy where Brother Hart was smooth. And he was dressed in animal skins that hung from his shoulders to his feet. About the man leapt fawning wolves, some spotted like jackals, some tan and some white. He pushed them from him with a rough sweep of his hand.

"I seek a deer," he called when he glimpsed Hinda's face, a pale moon, at the window.

But when Hinda came out of the door, closing it behind her to hide what lay inside, the man did not speak again. Instead he took off his fur hat and laid it upon his heart, kneeling down before her.

"Who are you?" asked Hinda. "What are you? And why do you seek the deer?" Her voice was gentle but firm.

The man neither spoke nor rose but stared at her face.

"Who are you?" Hinda asked again. "Say what it is you are."

As if she had broken a spell, the man spoke at last. "I am but a man," he said. "A man who has traveled far and seen much, but never a beauty such as yours."

"You shall not see it again, then," said Hinda. "For a man who hunts the deer can be no friend of mine."

The man rose then, and Hinda marveled at the height of him, for he was as tall as the cottage door and his hands were grained like wood.

"Then I shall hunt the deer no more," he said, "if you will give me leave to hunt that which is now all at once dearer to me."

"And what is that?"

"You dear heart," he said, reaching for her.

Like a startled creature, Hinda moved away from him, but remembering her brother inside the cot-

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tage, she found voice to say "Tomorrow." She reached behind her and steadied herself on the door handle. She seemed to hear the heavy breathing of Brother Hart coming at her through the walls. "Come tomorrow."

"I shall surely come." He bowed, turned, and then was gone, walking swiftly, a man's stride, through the woods. His animals were at his heels.

Hinda's eyes followed him down the path until she counted even the shadows of trees as his own. When she was certain he was gone, she opened the cottage door and went in. The cottage was suddenly close and dark, filled with the musk of deer.

Brother Hart lay on their straw bed. When he looked up at her, Hinda could not bear the twin wounds of his eyes. She turned away and said, "You may go out now. It is safe. He will not hunt you again."

The deer rose heavily to his feet, nuzzled open the door, and sprang away to the meadows.

But he was home again at dark.

When he stepped out of his skin and entered the cottage, he did not greet his sister with his usual embrace. Instead he said, "You did not call me to the clearing. You did not say my name. Only when I was tired and the sun almost gone did I know it was time to come home."

Hinda could not answer. She could not even look at him. His nakedness shamed her more than his words. She put their food on the table and they ate their meal in silence. Then they slept like beasts and without dreams.

When the sun called Brother Hart to his deerskin once again, Hinda opened the door. Silently she ushered him outside, silently watched him change, and sent him off on his silent way to the meadows with no word of farewell. Her thoughts were on the hunter, the man of the wolves. She never doubted he would come.

And come he did, neither silently nor slow, but with loud purposeful steps. He stood for a moment at the clearing's edge, looking at Hinda, measuring her with his eyes. Then he laughed and crossed to her.

He stayed all the day with her and taught her words she had never known. He drew pictures in the dirt of kingdoms she had never seen. He sang songs she had never heard before, singing them softly into her ears. But he touched no more than her hand.

"You are as innocent as any creature in the woods," he said over and over in amazement.

And so passed the day.

Suddenly it was dusk, and Hinda looked up with a start. "You must go now," she said.

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"Nay, I must stay."

"No, no, you must go," Hinda said again. "I cannot have you here at night. If you love me, go." Then she added softly, her dark eyes on his, "But come again in the morning."

Her fear touched him. So he stood and smoothed down the skins of his coat. "I will go. But I will return."

He whistled his animals to him and left the clearing as swiftly as he had come.

Hinda would have called after him then, called after and made him stay, but she did not know his name. So she went instead to the clearing's edge and cried:

Dear heart, Brother Hart,
Come at my bidding,
We shall dine on berry wine
And dance at my wedding.

And hearing her voice, Brother Hart raced home.

He stopped at the clearing's edge, raised his head, and sniffed. The smell of man hung on the air, heavy and threatening. He came through it as if through a swift current and stepped to the cottage door.

Rubbing his head more savgely than ever on the lintel, as if to rip off his thoughts with his hide, Brother Hart removed his skin.

"The hunter was here," he said as he crossed the door's threshold.

"He does not seek you," Hinda replied.

"You will not see him again. You will tell him to go."

"I see him for your sake," said Hinda. "If he sees me, he does not see you. If he hunts me, he does not hunt you. I do it for you, brother dear."

Satisfied, Brother Hart sat down to eat. But Hinda was not hungry. She watched her brother for a while through slotted eyes.

"You should sleep," she said at last. "Sleep and I will rub your head and sing to you."

"I *am* tired," he answered. "My head aches where yesterday he struck me. My heart aches still with the fear. I tremble all over. You are right. I should sleep."

So he lay down on the bed and Hinda sat by him. She rubbed cinquefoil on his head to soothe it and sang him many songs, and soon Brother Hart was asleep.

When the moon lit the clearing, the hunter returned. He could not wait until the morning. Hinda's fear had become his own. He dared not leave her alone. But he moved quietly as a beast in the dark. He left his dogs behind.

The cottage in the clearing was still except for a breath of song, wordless and longing, that floated on the air. It was Hinda's voice, and

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when the hunter heard it he smiled for she was singing tunes he had taught her.

He moved out into the clearing, more boldly now. Then suddenly he stopped. He saw a strange shape hanging by the cottage door. It was a deerskin, a fine buck's hide, hung by the antlers and the legs dangling down.

Caution, an old habit, claimed him. He circled the clearing, never once making a sound. He approached the cottage from the side, and Hinda's singing led him on. When he reached the window, he peered in.

Hinda was sitting on a low straw bed, and beside her, his head in her lap, lay a man. The man was slim and naked and dark. His hair was long and straight and came to his shoulders. The hunter could not see his face, but he lay in sleep like a man who was no stranger to the bed.

The hunter controlled the shaking of his hands, but he could not control his heart. He allowed himself one moment of fierce anger. With his knife he thrust a long gash on the left side of the deerskin that hung by the door. Then he was gone.

In the cottage Brother Hart cried out in his sleep, a swift sharp cry. His hand went to his side and, suddenly, under his heart appeared a thin red line like a knife's slash that bled for a moment. Hinda caught his hand up in hers and at the sight of the blood grew pale. It was the second time she had seen Brother Hart bleed.

She got up without disturbing him and went to the cupboard where she found a white linen towel. She washed the wound with water. The cut was long but it was not deep. Some scratch got in the woods perhaps. She knew it would heal before morning. So she lay down beside him and fitted her body to his. Brother Hart stirred slightly but did not waken. Then Hinda, too, was asleep.

In the morning Brother Hart rose, but his movements were slow. "I wish I could stay," he said to his sister. "I wish this enchantment were at an end."

But the rising sun summoned him outside. He donned the deerskin and leapt away.

Hinda stood at the door and raised her hand to shade her eyes. The last she saw of him was the flash of white tail as he sped off into the woods.

But she did not go into the cottage to clean. She stood waiting for the hunter to come. Her eyes and ears strained for the signs of his approach. There were none.

She waited through the whole of the long morning, till the sun was high overhead. Not until then did

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she go indoors, where she threw herself down on the straw bedding and wept.

At dusk the sun began to fade and the cottage darken. Hinda got up. She went out to the clearing's edge and called:

Dear heart, Brother Hart,
Come at my crying.
We shall dine on berry wine
And . . .

But she got no further. A loud sound in the woods stayed her. It was too heavy for a deer. And when the hunter stepped out of the woods on the very path that Brother Hart usually took, Hinda gave a gasp, part delight, part fear.

"You have come," she said, and her voice trembled.

The hunter searched her face with his eyes but could not find what he was seeking. He walked past her to the cottage door. Hinda followed behind him, uncertain.

"I have come," he said. His back was to her. "I wish to God I had not."

"What do you mean?"

"I sought the deer today," he said.

Hinda's hand went to her mouth.

"I sought the deer today. And what I seek, I find." He did not turn. "We ran him long, my dogs and I. When he was at bay, he fought hard. I gave the beast's liver and heart to my dogs. But this I saved for you."

He held up his hands then, and a deerskin unrolled from them. With a swift, savage movement, he tacked it to the door with his knife. The hooves did not quite touch the ground.

Hinda could see two slashes in the hide, one on each side, under the heart. The slash on the left was an old wound, crusted but clean. The slash on the right was new, and from it blood still dripped.

She leaned forward and touched the wound with her hand. Tears started in her eyes. "Oh, my dear Brother Hart," she cried. "It was for me you died. Now your enchantment *is* at an end."

The hunter whirled around to face her then. "He was your brother?" he asked.

She nodded. "He was my heart." Looking straight at him, she added, "What was his is mine by right." Her chin was up and her head held high. She reached past the hunter and pulled the knife from the door with an ease that surprised him. Gently she took down the skin. She shook it out once and smoothed the nap with her hand. Then, as if putting on a cloak, she wrapped the skin around her shoulders and pulled the head over her own.

As the hunter watched, she

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began to change. Like a rippled reflection in a pool coming slowly into focus, he saw slim brown legs, brown haunch, brown body and head. The horns shriveled and fell to the ground. Only her eyes remained the same.

The doe looked at the hunter for a moment more. A single tear started in her eye, but before it had time to fall, she turned, sprang away into the fading light, and was gone.

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So you think you'd like to try writing SF.

Two days from now (as this column passes through my typewriter), I'll climb into my car and drive to Michigan State University, there to again teach a week of the Clarion SF Writers' Workshop. Twenty-five students have been accepted from well over 100 applicants.

During the past academic year, I taught an SF writing workshop at Chicago's Columbia College, and then a course labelled SF History and Criticism which from its first day developed a definite bias toward being more of a workshop than it was a Lit course. In October, at Columbia, the same thing will undoubtedly occur again...and I imagine that, once again, there will be well over *n* students and fewer than *n* textbooks ordered for them.

Everybody wants to be an SF writer. And, in all truth, those who get into Clarion on the basis of the stories they submit with their applications, and those who crowd into the Lit course and by sheer willpower convert it into a writing course, show a remarkably high percentage of potential and actual talent.*

*Without respect to the instructors' talents. A teacher, good or bad, affects technique and motivation, *but* only God, Gregor Mendel and B.F. Skinner can account for the essentials.

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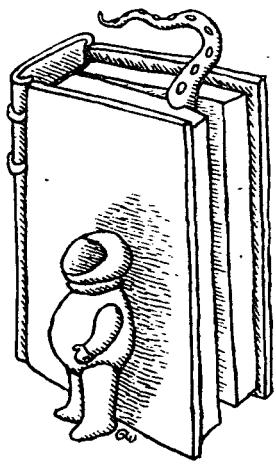

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Given the prerequisite that by college Senior age a lot of people have accepted their lack of ability, thus restricting the size of the pool of applicants, the results in classes of which I have any experience indicate that almost anybody aged 20, who wants to, *could* be an SF writer.

Not necessarily a major SF writer, or the writer of major SF stories — these are not always the same thing — except in the usual small number of instances. But a solid, working professional, piling up the sales, gradually developing recognition of his or her byline, and eventually, if time permits and the mortality stakes have played out accordingly, the Dean of Science Fiction.

I said *could*. Almost all won't. Won't become elder statespersons, won't develop sufficient publication frequency for their names to stick, won't even get past the first or second sale, if any.

Why is that?

If I knew exactly why, I'd found my own course and founder the market. But I have some plausible inexactitudes with which to begin accounting for the observed fact that neither the new approach, which encourages prospective writers, nor the old system which forced them to sink or swim by trial and error in a neutral climate, produces much more than one or two noteworthy new writers per year, and one superstar every three or four years.*

First, one big filter that screens out a lot of otherwise talented people is that they have writing talent but don't have SF orientations. They're twenty and they don't know the differences between *the* Solar System, a solar system, a galaxy, and a universe. They don't know what is meant by *n*. They don't know the difference between a gene and a chromosome, and they think electrons can be seen through an electron microscope.

So what? they say. They weren't planning to write "hard" science fiction anyway. They're going to make incisive social statements, setting them in a future designed to point out the shortcomings of the present. Lots of popular SF writers are doing that, they point out, so why can't they?

Because you can't accurately extrapolate a future piece of the universe without understanding that the universe is both emotional-

**When you consider that Clarion alone has processed about 250 prospects over the past 10 years, and then add in all the other worthwhile academic instructional facilities, plus the great number of people out there who just stay home and mail off hopeful amateur manuscripts every week, (and even if you count only the non-hopeless cases in that latter slushpile).... The mind boggles.*

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ly neutral and physically lawful, and, most important, that everything we have been able to observe and note about it verifies that assertion. There is no "Mother Nature," it doesn't always rain at funerals, but when it rains it can rain only in certain ways. You may not be able to predict those ways exactly, but you can certainly explain them when they happen, and in explaining them you learn more based on what you already knew, but you never learn anything that invalidates the known facts. People in the future will probably know even more. Whether they are in charge of society or derided by it, they will always *know* that they know. They will be the ones who make the wheels turn, either as slaves or as masters, and that's that.

So if you will look carefully at the *persistently* successful writers of social SF, you will find that underlying their "soft" SF speculations is a concordance with the universe as it is. You can't put on a play if you don't know the dimensions of the stage, and that's why you'd better know more about factors like Mendel and Skinner than you can get out of a biographical dictionary. If you're twenty and can't be bothered by all that, you'd better get into some other field — and lack of editorial and reader acceptance will rapidly bunt you over there. If you're simply blind to it, then you'd better bone up on at least the broad strokes of it, or the same thing will happen whether you "deserve" it or not.

So that rapidly eliminates a lot of promising candidates — especially most products of the modern U.S. secondary school system. That still leaves a surprising number of people.

But many of them don't understand that drama requires structure. Some of them are militant about it. They won't write "formula," and they think that the term "plot" is always preceded by the modifier "hackneyed." So they never learn the difference between bad structure and felicitous structure. More important, they never come to grips with the fact that the enjoyment of fiction springs from a reader identification with characters whose motivations are understandable.

To be understandable, they have either got to be so hackneyed that the reader can supply the context of their actions from his or her own experience, or, if subtle and imaginatively conceived, so clearly related to the time and place in which they occur that the reader can come to understand them. Otherwise, it doesn't really matter who's chasing the hero or how many laudable speeches the heroine makes.

In disdaining structure, many

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otherwise qualified newcomers may impress the hell out of critics, acquaintances of their own orientation, and anyone else who admires good prose, apt descriptions, well-executed gestures, and striking images. But SF in particular demands structure, since the reader can rarely supply much of the background, and talent after talent has dropped or been frozen out of the field by what he or she may call the "insensitivity" of the readers, or may ascribe to some mysterious personal shortcoming, but which is in fact simply a persistent mechanical failure to tell a story.

But there are enduring careers in SF, the novices cry out, which are founded on work that is not "storytelling." What they mean is it's not founded on what they can *detect* to be what they identify as "storytelling." They're twenty years old, and they think their analytical faculties are fully equipped already. Of course, if they disdain structure, they're never going to learn much about what can be done with it by people who are, say, one-and-twenty.

Now the numbers are diminishing toward manageable size. We're down to perhaps one person out of twenty-five who has passed through both screens.* When you consider that almost any market generates at least one manuscript a day that's worth reading twice; when you add in the scores of classrooms filled with earnest people who have made it that far, it's still a big number. We ought to be getting fifty, perhaps a hundred long-haul SF writers every year. But we don't.

The third big screen is the ability to set your head for writing, as distinguished from being a writer. Living a writer's life is pleasant, comforting, socially rewarding — remember, you yourself are determining what a writer's life consists of, so it's always nice *sui generis*. Writing, on the other hand, is something else. For a very few, it's compulsive. That may be fun; I wouldn't know, but I imagine it has its bad aspects. For the great majority, it's the last thing a writer wants to do. For a variety of reasons, most writers find it graspingly difficult to do the work of translating what's in the delicious mental processes onto manuscript paper.

Some don't do it much, and so disappear from public consciousness. Some do something worse; they rattle it off any old way, giving themselves a variety of comforting reasons, and market the result. Publishing being what it is, some of these latter hammer-mechanics occasionally rise to brief prominence on the basis of their ideas and the detectable intriguing quality of the

**And remember that the 25 were themselves survivors of the self-selection processes of their teen years.*

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creative conception to be found under the dross of delivery. But success, of course, tends to confirm the practicability of their methods, and so they never progress beyond them, and then vanish as soon as their bag of tricks has been once around the readership's awareness.

Now you ask me — What has all this got to do with a book review column?-Just killing two birds with one stone, Ms./Mr. Prometheus, just killing two birds....

Don Bensen is one of those people who makes the wheel go around. When he started a thousand years ago at Pyramid books as an SF editor, he had a number of innate talents. Fortunately, one of them was a persistent willingness to learn about this foreign field. Now he's the coordinating factor behind the Dial/Dell/James Wade Quantum series, and between then and now he's been an increasingly respected and influential figure in SF publishing.

Now, for Pete's sake, he's written an SF novel. It's a good one; in many ways, it's an excellent one, because it combines some standard SF ideas with a perspective and background of general culturation which makes something new of the whole thing. The net result is a solid SF story with a remarkable freshness of treatment.

Now, that's a huckster's phrase if I ever wrote one, but even a broken cliche is right twice a day, and on this occasion it happens to be exactly descriptive.

The premise will not astound you. Four interstellar astronauts discover terminal engine problems as they approach an uncharted planet. As they are about to crash fatally, one of them, who espouses mysterious techniques, uses a one-shot method of "saving" them. That is, he throws them into an alternate reality in which their ship does not crash. Instead, it lands on a vast ocean and then, generally intact, sinks beneath them, leaving them floundering ashore at San Francisco in the last year of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency.

Already you like it? Take my word for it, Bensen has his alien characters well drawn, and his depiction of America in the first decade of the 20th Century is either accurate down to the fine detail or should have been. In that respect, *And Having Writ...* is another *Ragtime.* Bensen is not quite as needlepointedly meticulous as Doctorow, but then, he's wisely not slowing down his narrative. Instead, he's driving toward another objective, which is the showing of these four supertechnological intelligent beings caught up in a serio-comic picaresque adventure.

Their objective, of course, is to hype up Earth's technology to the

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point where they can get the tools and materials to repair their ship and go home. They know it's going to take years — perhaps more years than they really want to think about — but that's life. (They're very human aliens, these; feisty, diffident, the leader types and the argumentative, the easily offended...in other words, they mix within themselves a number of recognizable qualities, and soon enough it's hard to remember when you didn't like them and worry about them).

They meet, of course, with Thomas Edison and T.R. Roosevelt, who is about to pass on the presidential nomination to William Howard Taft, not without some genial contempt. Their arrival, and the spreading world awareness of their arrival, sparked by a raffish newsman they encounter in the drunk tank which is their first Earthly domicile, results in all sorts of reverberations. One of them is that Edison gets the nomination, so he can properly lead America during this time of golden opportunity, and wins in a landslide.

Edison as president turns out not to be such a nice guy as far as the aliens are concerned. Sequestered by him so that they will not take their knowledge abroad, they and the newsman escape in a pretty good chase scene, and begin travelling pell-mell all over Europe, trying to start World War I. For one thing, they need the technological boost this will create. For another, one of them is convinced it's inevitable anyhow — they just want to make sure it comes off.

And so forth. Bensen is ceaselessly ingenious and inventive, propelling this creation in a manner and at a pace quite comparable to the good things about Jules Verne. Speaking of that, H.G. Wells is one of the major supporting characters. He's not altogether a stuffed classical figurine, either. I always knew I liked that man.

It all comes together in the end. While the bulk of the narrative wordage is apparently just one adventure after another, it is in fact building up a carefully thought-out structure. Consequently, Bensen is able to give it a relevant, resolved ending.

Up to now, he was a topflight editor. Now, he's also an exemplary as well as an entertaining writer.

We were speaking of the approval of critics. There's criticism and criticism, take your pick if you're a writer. But the kind of criticism that's 100% worthless to the reader is ideological criticism.

Criticism that boils down to: "This fellow has the wrong attitude" is *per se* an attempt at thought control. More subtly, it is an attempt to tell somebody that the vision which occurred, sweet,

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clear, intoxicating and profoundly innocent, is a vision that ought to have been resisted. "The moral course was to eat your young," it says.

For the author, believing that sort of criticism is equivalent to packing cancer cells into a wound in the brain. Promulgating it upon a writer in the earnest hope that it will take effect is a particularly exacerbated form of murder. That, of course, is the only marginal worth it has to a writer; when it becomes palpable, it says it's time to trade one's spirit for one's life. And if he or she has any smarts, criticism of this sort that declares: "This fellow has the right attitude down pat" is exactly the same thing.

And so we come to Soviet science fiction, as one aspect of Soviet literature in general. The Soviets have made a lot of mistakes. One I can understand is their singleminded devotion to ideological criticism. It's addictive, because every deviation detected in someone else is a boost for one's own rectitude, and all of us would like to feel that we're even more right with God than the next fellow. Because it's also a checklist form — that is, you don't have to perceive anything, you just have to compare the specifications of the new thing against the standard specifications — it attracts the educated dolt, who is the only kind of human being able to play academic politics over the long haul.

So by now the Soviet critical establishment must be entirely in the hands of long-lived, patient, powerful dolts. This has inevitable consequences for all Soviet authors — aside from physical problems such as keeping alive in Siberian winters — and it would argue that successful long-running authors of Soviet SF in particular have hypertrophied defenses and sensitivities. Unless they were always made out of tinted plastic, like Yefremov.

The astonishing thing about Arkady and Boris Strugatsky is that they are as fresh and witty as they are. But *Definitely Maybe* seems to confirm the suspicion that they are so only by comparison to most other Soviet SF writers, even the best of whom seem to be somewhere back in the 1940s, thrashing in great earnestness against the walls of a clinging transparent coccoon.

The premise of *Definitely Maybe* is that there *is* a Mother Nature — or, to explain it in the Strugatskys' terms, that Entropy can detect the intellectual progress of intelligent races, and abort it before it attains a level which might find a way to reverse that gradual running-down of the universe.

On this satirical foundation, which in many ways resembles that

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which underpins Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris,* the authors have erected a structure of Lem-like startling incidents which occur to a cast featuring charmingly or comically neurotic scientists. Entropy can send phony telegrams, nonexistent secret policemen, and nubile young ladies to the nutty professor whose wife and child are out of town. It can plant a full-grown tree in a barren courtyard. It can deliver a carton of assorted kinds of booze to the scientist and his buddies, and they can proceed to get continually sozzled on it while making quasi-profound speeches.

There's much that's genuinely amusing, genuinely thought-provoking on its own restricted terms, and engagingly quaint. But if anyone outside the Soviet sphere had written it, it would not be so lavishly packaged, nor equipped with the standard adulatory introduction by Theodore Sturgeon, who's never admitted to seeing a book he didn't like a very lot, nor would it seem as ingenious as it does.* It makes its point almost at once and then simply elaborates on it until it's time to bring out one last repeat of the opening fireworks and call the opus ended.

Some of that may be due to a cultural predilection for never tiring of having the Inspector General take yet another solemn pratfall. And some of the places where focus blurs may be due to the quality of the translation, though the prose runs along with a nice felicity and a better ear for contemporary Anglic slang than most. But what it is is a nice try at SF and entertainment. One thinks of Van Manderpootz, and Gallegher, the Lewis Padgett scientist who couldn't invent unless he was drunk, and never remember how it worked when he woke up the next morning. Very big in the 1930s and '40s. Very funny yet today, some of that, in an archaic way.

Of course, there is the obvious symbolic content of the premise in *Definitely Maybe,* and in *Solaris,* too. Is it conscious? Is it a cheap shot to ask if, willy-nilly, these people are trying to express something having to do with the climate they breathe in? Mother Nature — or Father Entropy, if you will — are neither one of them lawful, and neither one thinks its nice to have visions, except the nicest, most natural kinds, of course.

You say your muse has wings and it's doing *what* to your liver?

And, speaking of wings, there's *The Earth Book of Stormgate,*

**The introduction, by the way, mentions and then discusses all the other titles and authors in the publisher's Soviet SF series. I suspect it either is or was intended to be an all-purpose essay, for inclusion in* every *title in the series. One size fits all.*

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couched as a chronicle of the fearsomely avian Ythri race. It isn't that, of course — it's a collection of Poul Anderson's Polesotechnic League stories, including the complete definitive version of his novel, *The Man Who Counts*.

But it is couched, thus, handsomely well. Anderson is a writer who can make artwork of storytelling, and has done so with a remarkable consistency over thirty years as a professional.

Some of these stories may be new even to dedicated Anderson fans; they originally appeared in places like *Boys' Life*, and in original book anthologies. Single-minded readers only of SF magazine SF may have overlooked them. They should not continue to do so now.

It seems like such a simple, mechanical thing to do; laying out a history of the future, and then gradually filling in the niches with stories about people who have crucial problems that must be solved. It sounds like something you could do off the top of your head, because the future's imaginary, isn't it, but, then, you wouldn't want to be accused of working to formula, would you. And, besides, when you look at this book, an inch and a quarter thick, and think of how many times you'd have to hit the keys to make that many of those closely set marks on the paper — some of them maybe more than once before you could feel you'd done it well enough — and think that this is one volume of *five* in the League series alone, and here are twelve stories, including the novel, which must mean he had to come up with a minimum of twelve ideas — why, the man's mad to keep bringing us this gift!

Coming soon

Next month: "Concepts" a new novelet by Thomas M. Disch; stories by Ray Russell, Bruce McAllister, L. Sprague de Camp and others. Soon: new stories by Philip Jose Farmer, Robert Aickman, Marta Randall, Keith Roberts, Richard Cowper, and many others. The December issue is on sale November 2.

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Finally, we have the real story behind why a certain tower in Babylon was never finished and why all great builders, from Nebuchadnezzar to Moses (Robert), have such a rough time.

Project Hi-Rise

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

As soon as we got word that the strike was on, we walked off the job. It was 10:40 A.M. Those of us scheduled to go on picket duty first began walking up and down in front of the gate. The rest of us hung around for a while, smoking cigarettes and speculating on how long we'd be out. Then we meandered on home.

The minute she saw me, Debbie's face fell. When we voted the Union in last month, she had a fit, and ever since then she's been dreading a walkout. How were we going to manage now, she asked me when I came in the door, with prices the way they were and with no money coming in? I told her not to worry, that with the Project so close to completion and the King on their backs morning, noon and night, the Company would have to come across pronto. She said she hoped so, what with another mouth to feed any day now and our savings account down to two figures, and what would I like for dinner — baked fish or fried figs? I said baked fish.

Women don't understand about strikes, about how important it is for workers to show who they're working for that they mean business when they say they want more money. Sure, I know the Project's an important undertaking, but construction workers have to live the same as anybody else, no matter how important what they're constructing is. Like the Organizer says, it's dog-eat-dog these days, and workingmen have to look out for themselves, nobody else is going to.

This afternoon, Ike dropped by with a sixpac, and we sat around most of the rest of the day, drinking beer and talking. He's up for picket duty tonight; I'm not scheduled till tomorrow morning. I'm glad, because that'll give me a chance to at-

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tend the Union meeting tonight. Ike told me to listen real good so I could tell him all about it, and I said I would.

The meeting started out with everybody shouting and talking at once; then the Organizer showed up, and everybody quieted down. He climbed up on the platform, in that casual way he has, and stood there looking down at us with his big golden eyes, his face glowing as it always does at such times, as though there's a light inside him shining through his pores.

"Brethren," he said in that rich resonant voice of his, and instantly he had everybody's complete attention. It's no wonder we jumped at the chance to have him represent us at the bargaining table when he so generously offered to.

"Brethren," he repeated. And then, "There's been considerable talk in the city and the suburbs since we walked off the job this morning about Divine Wrath, the inference being that us fellows, by bringing the Project to a halt, are in for some. Well, don't you believe it, fellow members of Local 209 — don't you believe it for one minute! Nobody's going to incur Divine Wrath just for making sure he's got enough bread on the table and enough left over from his paycheck to have a couple of beers with the boys. If anybody's going to incur it, the Company is. Because I happen to have it from a pretty good source — and you can quote me on this if you like — that somebody up there doesn't *want* the Project completed."

All of us applauded. It was just what we'd wanted to hear. After the applause died away, the Organizer outlined what we were striking for, and I paid strict attention so I could tell Ike. It adds up to a pretty nice package: a fifteen-percent across-the-board hourly rate increase; full-paid hospitalization; retirement after twenty-five years service; nine paid holidays; three weeks vacation after four years on the job; and a podiatric clinic, financed and maintained by the Company, where brickmakers can receive immediate treatment for chilblains, arthritis and fallen arches.

After the meeting a bunch of us stopped in The Fig Leaf for a few beers. I was still there when Ike got off picket duty and dropped by. I told him about the package and he agreed it was a nice one. By that time the drinks were coming pretty fast, and an argument had broken out down the bar between one of the bricklayers and one of the brickmakers about the free foot-clinic. The bricklayer said that if they were going to furnish a free foot-clinic, they should furnish a free hand-clinic too, because a

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bricklayer was as liable to develop arthritis in his hands as a brickmaker was in his feet and in addition was performing a much more essential task. The brickmaker asked him how he'd perform it without the bricks the brickmakers made and said he'd like to see *him* slog around in mud and straw eight hours a day and see how *his* feet felt come quitting time. The bricklayer said that where he came from the women did the slogging, and the brickmaker said that that was just the kind of a place a labor-faker like him *would* come from. Somebody broke it up just in time.

Not long afterward I left. I didn't want to be hung-over on my first spell of picket duty. It was a cool night, and the stars were thick in the sky. I caught glimpses of the Project as I made my way home through the narrow streets. It dominates the whole city. The whole Plain, for that matter. It had sort of a pale, blurred look in the starlight, the six completed stages blending together, the uncompleted seventh one softly serrated against the night sky. Working on it every day, I've kind of forgot how high it is, how much higher it's going to be when we get back on the job. The highest thing ever, they say. I won't dispute that. It makes a palm tree look like a blade of grass and a man look like an ant. Looking at it tonight, I felt proud to be one of the builders. It was as though I'd built the whole thing myself. That's the way a bricklayer feels sometimes. It's really great. I feel sorry for brickmakers. You'd never catch me slogging all day in a mud hole.

Picket duty wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. There's been some talk about the Company hiring scabs, but I guess that's all it is — talk. Anyway, nobody tried to get in. Not that they'd have succeeded if they had. The setup is ideal for picketing. You'd almost think the Company had built the wall around the Project to make it easy for strikers to picket the place, come strike time, instead of to keep people from stealing bricks. The gate's pretty wide, of course, but four pickets can guard it easily, and the wall's high enough to discourage anybody from trying to scale it.

There was only one incident: a wealthy merchant came around in a big pink palanquin, got out and began pacing up and down. He didn't say anything — just kept looking up at that half-finished seventh stage and shaking his head. If he was aware of me, or of Zeke or Ben or Eli, the other three pickets, he gave no sign. Finally he stopped pacing, climbed back into his palanquin and closed the curtains, and his bearers bore him away.

At the Union Hall this evening

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the Organizer told us that another meeting between the Company and the Union has been arranged and that it's scheduled to take place day after tomorrow. This time, there's going to be a Mediator present — one that the King himself appointed. Maybe now we'll get somewhere. I hope so. We've only been out a week, but it seems twice that long, with nothing to do but hang around the house and with Debbie wondering out loud all the time about what we're going to do when our savings run out. To tell the truth, I'm kind of worried myself. Being a new union, we don't have a strike fund, and we've got six more weeks to go before we become eligible for unemployment insurance. Meanwhile, the bills keep coming in.

The second meeting is to take place this afternoon. All of us have our fingers crossed.

I drew picket duty again this morning. Ike picketed with me, having arranged it with the Organizer to change places with Ben. With my old buddy to talk to, time went by fast.

Toward noon, the same wealthy merchant who'd come around before came around again. After climbing out of his palanquin, he started pacing up and down the way he'd done on his first visit; only this time instead of looking up at the half-finished seventh stage and shaking his head, he kept glancing sideways at Ike and Eli and Zeke and me. Finally he singled me out and came over to where I was standing, shooting the breeze with Ike. He had pink cheeks, with jowls to match, and a big blunt nose. You only had to take one look at his hands to know he'd never done a lick of work in his life.

"You impress me as being a sensible young man," he said. "What's your name?"

"Jake," I said.

"Jake. Well, Jake, I happen to be a wealthy merchant, as you may have guessed. In Frankincense and Myrrh. But I'm here just as an ordinary citizen — a citizen who is doing his level best to try to understand why certain other citizens have put their personal interests above the common interests of the community-as-a-whole and aborted a community project."

"I thought it was a Company project," Ike said, butting in.

"The Company is in the King's employ. The King, *ex officio*, is the very essence of the community. Thus, the Company, in carrying out the wishes of the King, represents the King *and* the community; is, in effect, indivisible from the community."

"Not in my book," I said. "But I can see why it would be in yours. After the King lets fly with his ar-

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row, you guys with all the bread will be the first ones up the ladder."

The wealthy merchant stiffened. "Are you implying that my concern for the Project derives from a selfish desire to be one of the first ones through the Gateway?"

"He's not implying it, he's saying it," Ike said. "You guys just can't wait to grease old Yahweh's palm, can you? You can't wait to tell him you think the King is a kook."

The wealthy merchant's pink cheeks were now a shade darker than his jowls. A purplish cloud had begun to gather on his forehead. "Young man," he said, "you sound positively paganistic. Don't *you* want to get into Heaven?"

"Not if you fat cats get there first," Ike said.

The purplish cloud broke. "Well, you may rest assured you aren't going to!" the wealthy merchant shouted. "Not if I have anything to say about it!" He pointed successively at Eli and Zeke and me. "And neither are you or you or you!" With that, he stamped back to his palanquin, got in and yanked the curtains closed, and the bearers trotted off with it. We stood there laughing.

Tonight at the Hall, the Organizer told us to tighten our belts, that at the bargaining table this afternoon the Company had refused to budge from its original offer of a flat five-percent raise and that he, as our representative, had informed them they could shove it and that despite the Mediator's pleas both sides had walked out.

Afterward, Ike and I stopped in The Fig Leaf for a couple of beers. Ike seemed worried. "Do you think he really has our best interests at heart, Jake?" he asked.

"Of course he does!"

"I suppose you're right. But sometimes I get the feeling that he's using us guys for some purpose of his own."

"What purpose?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling — that's all."

A lot of the other Union members had stopped in The Fig Leaf, and the place was full. Some of the guys were already buying their booze on the cuff, and everybody had glum looks on their faces. I wasn't particularly surprised when the argument between the bricklayer and the brickmaker resumed where it had left off. This time, nobody broke it up.

It was late when I finally got home. All evening I'd dreaded having to face Debbie with the bad news. But when I looked in the bedroom, she was sound asleep.

At long last the Mediator has got both sides to agree to another meeting. It's to take place tomor-

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row morning. I think the Organizer should back down a little — settle, say, for a ten-percent raise and forget the fringe benefits. True, it's only been two weeks since we walked off the job, but Debbie and I have already run up a sizable food bill at the Mom & Pop store around the corner, what's left of our savings will just about cover the rent, and I'm smoking Bugler instead of Winstons. And any day now, as Debbie keeps reminding me, we're going to have another mouth to feed. Feeding it doesn't worry me half so much as paying the hospital and doctor bills.

Ike and I were on picket duty when we heard that the latest bargaining session had gone Pffft! Eli was on too, and a bricklayer named Dan. It was clear by this time that the Organizer had no intention of settling for a smaller package, and it was equally as clear that the Company had no intention of coming through with a bigger one.

Eli didn't see it that way. "Hell, Jake, they'll have to come through," he said. "We've got them right by the balls!"

I told him I hoped he was right.

"Look," Dan said. "We've got a visitor."

Four black bearers had appeared, bearing a long black palanquin. They proceeded to set it down directly before the gate. I knew from its length that here was no ordinary wealthy merchant, but I was unprepared for the personage who presently stepped out and stood gazing at the Project with black blazing eyes. Those eyes burned right through Ike and Eli and Dan and me, as though we weren't even there, then swept upward, absorbing the entire Project with a single glance. It dawned on me finally, as I took in the small gold crown nestled in the black ringleted hair, the flared eyebrows, the fierce nostrils and the defiant jaw, that I was looking at the King.

As the four of us stood there staring at him, he raised his eyes still higher, and their blackness seemed to intensify, to throw forth fire. It was the briefest of illusions, for a moment later he turned, climbed back into his palanquin and clapped his hands. We stared after it as the four black bearers bore it away.

"Whew!" Ike said.

I rolled and lit a cigarette to see how bad my hands were shaking. Pretty bad, I saw. I blew out a lungful of smoke. "I wonder what he wanted," I said.

"I don't know. But I'd hate to be in the Organizer's sandals."

"The Organizer can take care of himself."

"I hope so."

We let it go at that.

* * *

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You've got to give the Mediator credit. Somehow he managed to get the two sides together again.

The Organizer had the minutes of the meeting Xeroxed and distributed them among the members. I have mine before me:

THE MEDIATOR: The Company Representative has informed me that considerable confusion exists among the populace as to the true nature of the Project's purpose, and he would like to clear this little matter up before proceeding further with the negotiations.

THE ORGANIZER: The purpose of the Project has no bearing whatsoever upon the reasonable demands made upon the Company by Local 209.

THE MEDIATOR: Nevertheless, I feel that in fairness both to the Company and to the King that the confusion should be cleared up.

THE ORGANIZER: Very well. But keep in mind that the typical member of Local 209 is concerned solely with how much his efforts will net him, not with the use to which their end result will be put.

THE COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: I will be brief. Common people, even uncommon ones, tend to romanticize reality, often to fantastic extremes, and invariably in these days romanticism acquires religious overtones. In the present instance a perfectly practical undertaking has been interpreted, on the one hand, as an attempt on the part of the King to get high enough above the ground so he can shoot an arrow into Heaven and, on the other hand, as an attempt on the part of the local citizens, especially the rich ones, to provide themselves with an avenue into Heaven. The two interpretations have somehow intermingled and become one. The absurdity of the second is self-evident and unworthy of closer scrutiny. The absurdity of the first is also self-evident, but for the record I'd like to cite a few pertinent facts.

According to the best estimates of our astronomers, Heaven is located 1,432 cubits above the world. The Project, if it is completed, will reach a height of 205 cubits. This means that the King's arrow would have to travel 1,227 cubits — straight up. Now, it is a well-known fact that the King is a great hunter — a *mighty* hunter. No one can bend a bow the way he can. But *1,227 cubits? Straight up?*

Thus, the facts alone make it clear that the King has no such intent. His real purpose in building the Project is to provide a haven. A haven to which the people can flee should a second phenomenal rainfall again cause the Twin Rivers to overflow their banks to such an extent that the entire Plain becomes inundated. Living on that Plain, the members of Local 209 stand to

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benefit from the Project as much as the rest of the people. For them to have, in effect, sabotaged such a noble undertaking is, frankly, beyond my comprehension, unless their motive for doing so can be partially attributed to their unwitting acceptance of the popular interpretation of the Project's purpose.

THE ORGANIZER: If the Project's real purpose is to provide a haven, why weren't they and the rest of the people so informed in the first place?

THE COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE: I cannot, of course, speak for the King. But I should imagine that he considered it so glaringly obvious that there was no need for the dissemination of such information.

THE ORGANIZER: To me, it was never obvious. It still isn't. In the first place, only minimal flooding has occurred since the Inundation; in the second, it's highly unlikely that Yahweh will again choose that particular form of chastisement should future foul-ups on the part of the human race necessitate additional punishment; and in the third, if he does decide on a second Inundation, you can rest assured that it will be of such dimensions that the only thing the Project will be a haven for will be fish. But I'll play the game fair: I'll see to it that the members of Local 209 have access to these minutes; and if, after reading them, they wish to take another strike vote, I won't stand in their way. Meanwhile, the package stays as is.

There was a special meeting tonight at the Union Hall. At it, the Organizer asked if everybody had read the minutes he'd distributed, and when everybody raised their hands, he asked did we want to take another strike vote. There was a big chorus of nays and not a single yea. That shows how union brothers stick together when the chips are down.

I've got to admit, though, that before I yelled my nay I had a bad moment. I'm still not sure I did right. Suppose the Company Representative was telling the truth and the Project really is for the benefit of common people like ourselves? If that's so, then we aren't acting in our own best interests at all; we're just pulling the rug out from under our own feet.

The Company has pulled out!

Zeke brought us the news while we were on picket duty this morning. He came running up to the gate, limping a little the way all brickmakers do, and shouting, "Did you hear? Did you hear? The Company's gone! They've struck their tents and left!"

I stood there stunned. So did

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Ike. So did Eli and Dan. Ike got his breath back first. "Where's the Organizer?" he asked Zeke in a sort of whisper.

"He's gone too. We can't find him anywhere."

There was a silence. Then Zeke said, "I've got to go tell the rest of the guys." He looked at us kind of helplessly. "I guess there's not much sense picketing any more."

"No, I guess not," I said.

After he left, none of us said a word for a long time. Then Ike whispered, "It was like I said all along. The Organizer was using us."

"But why?" Dan asked.

Ike shook his head. "I don't know."

"We've got company," Eli announced.

We looked. It was that long black palanquin again. Out of it stepped the King.

This time, he had brought his bow with him. It was slung diagonally across his back. His right hand held an arrow.

Again those black and burning eyes of his seemed to absorb the Project from its bottommost brick to its topmost one. There was a purposefulness about his mien that had been lacking on his previous visit; a fierce, almost an awesome, determination that made him seem larger than life. His black eyebrows were like the wings of a hawk; his lips were set like bitumen. He was wearing a maroon turtleneck with a big N on the front, blue Levis and thick-soled chukka boots.

He strode toward the gate. The four of us were standing right in his path, and we stepped aside when he neared us. If we hadn't, he'd have bowled us over.

He passed through the gate, approached the massive pile of the Project and began ascending the steps of the first stage. Ike and I, coming out of our daze, followed him. Not to try and stop him but to catch him in case he slipped and fell.

When he reached the apron of the second stage, he strode across it and began ascending the second series of steps. We kept right on his heels. It was at this point that I noticed he was mumbling something under his breath. I listened hard, but I couldn't make out what it was.

He surmounted the second stage. The third. Ike and I stayed right behind him. The fourth. The fifth. We were high now. Looking down over my left shoulder, I could see the dimunitive dwellings of the city and the minuscule mud huts of the suburbs. Looking down over my right, I could see the Plain, with its myriad fields of millet and barley and its sparkling irrigation ditches. In the distance the easternmost of the Twin Rivers gleamed like gold

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in the morning sun.

Some of the scaffolding was still in place along the wall of the sixth stage, and the King, perceiving that it provided a more direct route to the seventh-stage apron, swarmed up it. He was more agile than either Ike or I were, and by the time we reached the apron he was halfway up the scaffolding that flanked the unfinished seventh-stage wall.

I became aware of the wind. It was blowing steadily up from the south. I could smell the sea in it. The Project swayed, ever so slightly. But that was all right. The engineers had allowed for the wind. I'd felt it sway lots of times, and I was no stranger to the wind.

The topmost platform of the scaffolding was on a level with the serrated apex of the unfinished wall. Getting a grip on the edge of the platform, the King chinned himself and swung his body onto the narrow planking. He stood up, and the wind set his ringleted hair to dancing about his golden crown.

Ike and I remained on the apron below.

The King shook his fist at the blue and cloudless sky. "I knew all along that fucking Organizer was working for you!" he shouted. "He never fooled me for a second! But he wasted his time, because I'm still gonna do what I said I was gonna do, right from here!" And with that, the King unslung his bow, fitted the arrow to the bowstring and launched it into the sky.

Straight up, it sped, impervious to the wind, seeming to gather momentum with every cubit it traveled. Ike and I no longer breathed. Everything in all creation except that arrow had ceased to exist for us. In our eyes it had become a thunderbolt — a thunderbolt cast heavenward by a madman in a magnificent, if senseless, gesture of defiance.

It neither faltered nor slowed. Any moment now, it seemed, it would pass through the invisible Gateway and disappear. It was high enough: it *had* to. But it didn't. For, all of a sudden, a great hand emerged from the firmament, reached down and seized the tiny shaft. A mighty thumb pressed it between two mighty fingers. There was a distant *snap!*, barely audible above the wind. Then the hand withdrew, and the broken arrow fell back to earth and landed at the King's feet.

He stood there staring down at it.

An aeon went by. There was no sound except the whistling of the wind in the scaffolding. Then a loud sob reached our ears. Another. We turned away and slowly descended the successive stages to the ground. We didn't look back — not once. You might think you'd enjoy

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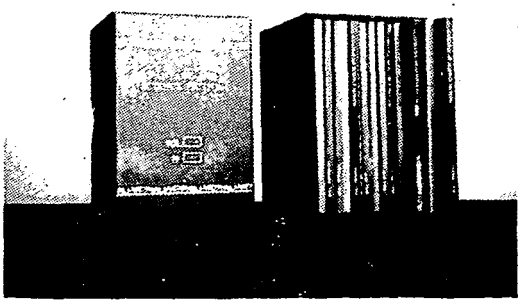
seeing a king cry, but you wouldn't. It's like watching a mountain dwindle into an ant hill, a city crumble into dust, a kingdom turn into trash.

Well, Local 209 pulled out, just like the Company did. We knew there'd be no more jobs on the Plain for the likes of us. We spread out all over. North and south and east and west. I went south. Right now, I've got a flunky's job in a granary. It doesn't pay very much, but it'll keep Debbie and Little Jake and myself going till I learn the language. Once I learn the language, I'll get back in Construction. There's a big project about to begin just east of here. From what I gather, it's a tomb of some kind, and it's supposed to set a new trend. Building it may take as long as a year, and they're going to need all kinds of skilled labor. I figure that as a bricklayer I can get on easy.



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"I figure everybody else is doing it."

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Here is an unusual story about an unforgettable child prodigy named Little Goethe. All we know about M. Mendelsohn is that he is a university professor in England and that this is his first published work of fiction. A remarkable debut.

Little Goethe

by M. MENDELSOHN

One

From time to time, a pencil sketch of a face emerges and fades at the French window. It occurs always in the same place: the penultimate pane in the right-hand row.

The sky is blue. Somewhere on the road towards Tonbridge Wells a motor horn sounds, insistently. From my sandpit the blossom looks like braided ribbons of pink and white silk. I sit, cross-legged, holding a damp fistful of sand, staring open-mouthed at the shifting grains. Inside my head, the synapses of my brain are jammed, like city bridges in a rush hour, with electrochemical traffic. The very serenity of this spring morning — the innocence of the leaves, the blandness of the house across the lawn testifies to the arrival of crises. Have they seen through me at last? I feel it in my diminutive bones. I am getting careless these days, I am getting old. I can't remember my lines, my cues, my part so well.

I am Everard Sharpe. At least, that is what Caitlin and Gilbert call me. To all intents and purposes, I am eight years old. For the last seven years, I have been considered a prodigy. As soon as they discovered the extraordinary nature of the child they had adopted, Caitlin and Gilbert set out, with great determination and self-sacrifice, to create a set of circumstances — a uniquely rich soil — in which their precocious young orchid could be brought to early bloom. Such are the blind energies of sublimation.

With what nostalgia now I look round my study. My hand strays in an affectionate caress over the back of my old friend, the miniature leather armchair in which, at the tender age of two (it seems so long ago now), I sat, my legs dangling short of the Persian rug, to render lispingly the opening sentences of Thucydides *Peloponnesian Wars.*

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Later on, a special system of ladders was devised, fitted on brass runners that ran all round the room, so that I in my thirst for knowledge could ransack unaided the topmost shelves.

If only those days could return ... what innocence. Every morning, I used to play chameleons. After breakfast — a light collation of rusks and cream which I took alone, surrounded by the day's newspapers, in my cot — I invited Caitlin and Gilbert to choose for me at random a piece of English prose, precisely twelve hundred words in length — something, say, from Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, or a choice piece of Gibbon perhaps. Entranced, I carried it — if it was small enough — into my study, where I translated it without pause through Greek, Latin, German, French and Italian, before retranslating it into English. If my final passage did not agree, strictly, word for word, with the original, I considered myself to have failed and started over again. I did not arrive at the coincidence of original and final passages by any act of memory. The whole virtue of the game was this: the language in which I finished — the world I finished by inhabiting — was not being *returned to*, but created anew; it was, in my protean eyes, merely one of many, merely the particular medium in which I — joyful chameleon as I then was — chose to bask.

My study is now only a friendly dinosaur. My digital computer has an information retrieval system capable of retaining ten times the knowledge that is stacked laboriously on its shelves. It rests on my bedside table.

My chessboard stands idle now, the ebony and ivory pieces cradled in their green baize graves. It is almost six years since the final of the World Infant Chess Championships in Belgrade. My opponent was Rechevsky, a scowling, heavily fancied one-year-old from the Ukraine. Strapped into our highchairs in the center of the smoke-filled auditorium, we looked more like the umpires in some other game than players in our own. I opened quietly, noticing the flicker of contempt which crossed Rechevsky's face. I knew from the press he had been studying my openings. He produced a Sicilian. At the third move, as he took my pawn, he permitted himself to smile. But at the fifth, his amusement faded. The game took a qualitative leap: instead of the expected dragon, I drew forth an accelerated *fianchetto*, a treasured quotation from Holzhausen-Tarrasch 1912. At the seventh, still suffering from shock, like Tarrasch all those years before him, Rechevsky castled desperately. By the tenth, the truth of his

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plight was brought home to him. My bishop removed the intervening pawn and held him in check. He had no choice but to take my bishop with his king, thus exposing it. My knight advanced. For Rechevsky, Scylla and Charybdis finally hove into view: if now he used his pawn to get rid of my bishop, his queen would be taken; if he used his king again, he would be drawn into my mating-net. The game was effectively over in ten moves. White with disbelief, Rechevsky was unstrapped from his chair and carried from the hall. Rumor has it that so great was his pique, he has not yet acquired the art of speech.

Alas, those days are long since gone. A line of poetry now comes to seem like a recrimination. The more ancient, the more telling the judgment. Sometimes, I repeat to myself Virgil's immortal

Sunt lacrimae rerum,
et mentem mortalia tangunt

and in each of my eyes there rises — irrepressible, flecked with amber — a sea-green hemisphere. A precise degree of impersonal sadness: not a milliliter less or more. My head bows. If ever those lines applied to a life, it is mine.

Two

I was born in Vienna in 1898. My mother Roma was the by-blow of a brief encounter between a Slovenian peasant woman and a wealthy Triestine, a manufacturer of special paints for the hulls of ships. She was selling apples at a stall by the side of the road, when he happened to pass by. According to Roma, she offered him one, and the fateful transaction took place with all speed behind the stall. The analogy with the alleged mother of mankind was not lost on Roma's fertile imagination.

Roma early showed a talent for music and eventually, with the help of her father's discreet influence, found her way into the Vienna Conservatoire. Afterwards, she became a soprano at the Opera House. A long-legged brunette with an inimitable swaying walk and coal-black eyes, she was very much in demand at salons and parties. She formed a series of liaisons with men of taste and substance and became rich.

She also became pregnant, though she would never tell me which one of the stream of visitors to our roomy apartment overlooking the Ringstrasse was my father. Ouf, cried Roma, her eyes waltzing with innuendo. Your little head will grow bigger than it is already. Then he is noble, I insisted, he is extraordinary. But her only reply was to slide mischievously into the chorale from the last scene of *Don Giovanni,* wrapping her seductive lips round the words and dropping into an outrageous Triestine accent:

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Where is the miscreant?
Where is the criminal?
Now shall our retribution
be unleashed

She was impossible, unpredictable; and for a few years, she won such a following, she was so fashionable, that she could do anything she pleased.

Roma loved to offend etiquette: she insisted on humping me through the crowded streets herself, a relic no doubt of her Balkan peasant blood. My first few words were echoes of cafe repartee, which Roma took shameless advantage of. I lay impassive in my bassinet, or sat, skewered to a chair with her one gloved hand, while she flirted with the other across the table. I was appealed to, rhetorically at first, for my judgment in all matters from affairs of the heart to the minutiae of business strategy; soon, much to everyone's amusement except Roma's, I gave it. At six months I could read fluently in Italian and German. "Little Goethe," they nicknamed me, those bewhiskered bankers and envious bohemians.

At first Roma loved it. She played up to her Little Goethe: she pouted with pride, her generous mouth puckering into a rosebud, whipping up applause everywhere for her portable oracle. But soon she realized that Little Goethe was beginning to steal her thunder. One day, I overreached myself: I corrected the waiter as to the amount of the bill. Consternation reigned; then roars of laughter broke out, as I was pronounced correct. Roma looked daggers. Herr Schneider, the stockbroker, leaned across the table. Roma, I heard him whisper, this little fellow is beginning to upstage you... why don't you let Professor Gruber have him...? The child may have something wrong with him, do you take my meaning? If he doesn't, in any event he'll need sending away to a special school. I swear he will be a prodigy... he looks sickly to me... look how big his head is....

Some time after this conversation, a grave man with gigantic side-whiskers and a porcelain tulip in his buttonhole, appeared at the door of the apartment and presented his card. Roma's eyes lit up when she saw the flower. Ah, Magyar, she said, a patriot is always welcome at my door, Herr Professor. Gruber advanced and kissed her hand. He drew himself up to his full height: My mother, Erzebet Hatvany, he said solemnly, married Gruber the German in Budapest, much to my cost. He indicated his buttonhole. But this tariff war, believe me, is only the beginning of the end for this unfortunate Prussian attachment....

Immediately they fell into passionate anticipation of the fall of the Hapsburg Empire. In her less

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self-conscious moments, Roma thought of herself as an Irredentist. I knew better: her so-called nationalism was founded on one thing. Roma had her eyes on Milan. She dreamt of herself, the Trieste dispute finally settled, taking La Scala by storm: the bella figura of a reunified Italy. She quoted Mazzini and Garbaldi by the yard. Passionately, she picked up the newspaper, Even that fool, Nigra, the Italian ambassador, is saying that Austria's policy is nothing more than effacement....

Gruber replied with a first-hand account of the funeral of Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot, instancing the atrocities of the Austrian troops; he finished by quoting in resonant Hungarian the prophetic warning of Kossuth on his deathbed, to the effect that the Hapsburgs were doomed, and unless she broke away, Hungary also would perish in the flames....

They cemented their alliance by going to the piano and singing, their arms firmly wrapped about one another, a round of Liszt's peasant melodies, interspersed with Italian marching songs.

The result of this mutual rhapsody was that later in the day I found myself in a fiacre, lying on red plush, being addressed on all manner of subjects by Professor Gruber. I didn't like the turn events had taken. The politics of the situation were delicate. Tempting as it was, the possibility of answering plainly and truthfully the questions he put to me was out of the question. If I did that, I should endanger my credibility as a prodigy, by appearing far too advanced. I did not know what the exact consequences of "appearing as I was" would be, but instinctively I felt they would be awkward and unpleasant: I should almost certainly have to leave Roma. On the other hand, if I didn't respond at all, he would conclude that I was either a perfectly ordinary child, or even a dull one. This was infinitely preferable as a stratagem, but I knew it wouldn't work. Gruber's opinion would simply be discarded by Roma: she knew that I was neither of these already; she would know therefore that I had deceived him. She would almost certainly seek a second opinion. I should have to go through it all again. No, I reasoned, the only course of action which would foil Roma was to present myself as an uninteresting, second-rate sort of child prodigy, of the kind that are two-a-penny in any society at any time. This would satisfy both of them, and it would give her some badly needed ammunition with which to discredit me in front of the crowd at Schmidts. Gruber's questions, I determined, were to be answered by an instructive pattern of errors.

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In the swaying carriage he ordered me to watch him carefully; then he proceeded to put his hands together, fingers interlocked, and squeeze them one against the other close to my ear. They squelched loudly (he had exceedingly moist palms). Now, said Gruber, smoothing his mustache, pay the closest possible attention. Look at my hands ... is there anything in them? He spread them, like a conjurer, under my nose. They reeked of carbolic soap and something else I had not smelt before. I looked up at him and shook my head. Then, said Gruber triumphantly, What is *that?* He squelched them again, close to my ear. I closed my eyes, giving the impression, I hoped, of one deep in confusion; a tiny brain, wrestling with a completely new phenomenon. I decided to risk it so far. Air, I said cautiously. And where does this "air" come from? said Gruber. I appeared to think for a moment. In reality, I was repressing an impulse to throw caution to the winds and crush this insulting, patronizing line of questioning once and for all; the voice of intellectual honesty rose strong and clear in my head: "The pressure of your hands," it declared with bell-like clarity, "pushes out the air, causing a vacuum. Aided by your excessive and disgusting sweat, your palms then adhere to one another. As you then relax your hands and allow an opening to appear, air rushes back into the vacuum, which, as every schoolboy knows, Nature abhors."

The moment passed. I had overcome the temptation. I opened my eyes and looked around. It's everywhere, I said. Does it come from beneath the carriage? said Gruber. I swallowed. Who knows where this labyrinth would lead? I nodded. Ha, shouted Gruber, Could my hands make that noise, if there were no air in the carriage? Again, I paused and frowned in apparent concentration. Integrity urged again, with the clarity of a loud-hailer: "Certainly not, for then there would be no air initially for your palms to displace." Again, with considerable effort, I ignored it. Yes, I said. Why? pounced Gruber. Because, I said, inwardly groaning at my corruption, air could still come in through the hole. I pointed at a gap in the floor, through which the road could be seen rushing by. Gruber smiled and took out his pad.

A discussion followed on the nature of my respiratory system, in which I resolutely emptied my mind of as many of its assumptions as I could manage. Shamelessly, I claimed to have no lungs. I suggested that air was attracted in some mysterious way to my mouth as I spoke. To do this, I had to suppress whole paragraphs of Harvey's trea-

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tise on the circulation of the blood, which appeared, as if on a lighted screen, before my eyes. Before long, I had embarked on a medieval view of my anatomy and physiology.

The conversation broke off when we drew up at Gruber's school in the Wekeriestrasse. We climbed several flights of stairs — Gruber and the coachman, that is, in whose burly arms I was cradled — and entered a large room. There I was put down in a sea of white — shawled hopefuls like myself. From the walls a gaggle of parents—natural and adopted — began to call out instructions to their offspring. As we entered the room, the racket diminished slightly and a momentary hush fell on the company; it was then that I realized what a powerful man my inquisitor was. He disappeared through a door, leaving me lying helpless amongst them.

Everywhere I could hear their growling voices; all round me I sensed the rustle of their frail intellects, as they crawled heavily over one another like worms in a jar, issuing challenges. Before I could protest, I was jammed in a fetid corner between two of them. One thrust his (or her, it was difficult to tell) milky, jowled face into mine and challenged me to a duel of quadratic equations. Best of three, it leered. I declined as politely as I could, for I didn't wish to draw attention to myself. Calisthenics, my friend, I murmured, do not appeal to me. Then the creature on the other side puffed up its already swollen cheeks like a toad and offered to blow me out of the room with Mozart's horn concerto.

What a flea circus! What blind, crawling mechanisms of human vanity! I pitied them, that crowd of force-fed mountebanks, as they bawled out their cheap-jack wares, their *tricks*, with insolent rivalry. Yet I was forced to impersonate one of them; and I was already having such miserable success that even the tutored eye of Gruber could not distinguish me from them. For a moment, I was shaken: supposing he never returned. Appearance would close over reality, like the lid over a coffin.

I surveyed the crew round the walls, and my confidence returned. I read in their faces the long tale of food withheld, sleep interrupted, the driving, disorting pressure to achieve their primitive, vicarious goals. But with confidence came a new awareness of my isolation. How could I have explained to anyone that the only goal my mind ever needed or acknowledged was an enlightened form of self-perception? My mind unfolds — sweetly, incessantly — within its own proportions by spontaneous applications of pure reason. My curiosity — insati-

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able in all things — is satisfied ultimately by the agency of what appears to be a superior act of memory.

I had at that time recently arrived, without any form of outside consultation beyond the execution by humming of a modest piece of Palestrina (a favorite lullaby of Roma's), at an embryonic version of the theory of polyphony, a theory which had taken, according to the vagaries of historical process, some seven centuries to evolve. I was already reaching the stage of predicting — again, without consulting dictionaries or histories of music — some of the less complex developments of the Renaissance and Baroque eras.

How could I have explained this to a horn-blowing toad?

Fortunately, such a herculean task was not required of me, for Gruber reappeared. He clapped his hands and informed everyone that the school would be closed for a week.

As soon as the last of them was out of the massive front door, Gruber locked it decisively. I was left squatting alone, rafted on my shawl in a vast expanse of parquet, trying to prevent the relief from showing on my face. Then for a week he went to work on me.

The first few days were taken up with a meticulous physiological examination. He took me into his laboratory. Over the door was a large placard, placed as if to remind him of something. It read:

BEWARE OF
PERSEVERATION!

Crooning snatches of a Magyar ballad, he stripped me of my swaddling clothes and laid me on the table. For three days, he pored over me, making frantic notes on a pad by his side. When he came to my vertebrae, he muttered and sighed and shook his head, as if all was lost. He pried open my mouth, counted my teeth, and shone his torch down my throat. Then he seemed to get absorbed in something down there. He drew in his breath and felt my neck on the outside. My skull he took gently in his hands, as if it were a piece of delicate china, inspected it and weighed it thoughtfully. Then he put me upright in a padded clamp and read off all kinds of measurements.

After that, we took the fiacre again and drove across Vienna at wild speeds. Each morning he resumed his restless catechism. But by now I had become more skilled in negotiating the rapids of interrogation, spicing my replies with exactly the degree of intellectual solecism which he wanted to hear. As we were driving along one morning after breakfast, Gruber noticed a cloud in the sky. He pointed to it and asked me if it was moving. I

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said that it was. What makes it move? he asked. *We* did, I answered. He immediately stopped the carriage and we walked into the park. He propped me on a bench. Cumulonimbus drifted fleecily, peacefully by. It cannot be us, he said, slyly, for now we are still. Ah, said I, but look over there at the bustling street. Others are moving. Ha, said Gruber, we shall see. He got up and bundled me into the carriage. We drove out towards Aspern and stopped and walked into the middle of a flat field. There were no people to be seen, except ourselves. In the sky hung a single raincloud. Now, said Gruber. We waited. It remained exactly where it was. Get on, said Gruber under his breath. We waited another five minutes. The cloud remained stationary in the middle of the sky. We walked back to the carriage, Gruber visibly upset. When we reached the carriage, we turned to look for a last time at the cloud. It was almost out of sight, hastening across the sky, as if to some appointment for which it was late. You see, said Gruber, it has moved. Ah, said I, but so have we. Clicking his tongue furiously, he almost threw me into the carriage and reached for his pad.

On the way back to Vienna, we passed a lake. We stopped. He held me up at the side of the open carriage. You see the lake, he said, what is it? I told him it was water. Do you see it move? he asked. There are waves, I said, lapping at the edges. Why are the waves only at the edges? he asked. I paused. He prodded me. Is it because they are naughty? he asked. I smiled scornfully. If that were the reason, I replied, there would come a time when the lake got tired of punishing them, and they would all go back to the middle again, but they don't go that way. Then why *do* the waves move? said Gruber, his nose somewhat out of joint. Because the lake is getting ready for the boats, I said. He looked across at the water for some time in silence. Then he rounded on me, his finger held high. The boats, he cried, are all moored. Yes, I replied, but the boatmen are on their way....

Immediately he ordered the coachman to drive on. After the cloud incident, I had the suspicion he did not wish to risk the appearance of any boatmen.

Sometimes we drifted into what amounted to a reversal of roles, though Gruber didn't seem to notice this. One day, when we came in sight of the river, he caught me in his arms and ran across the grass down the embankment to the towpath. He took out his red silk handkerchief and threw it into the water. As the handkerchief drifted off, he asked me which way was the river flowing. When I told him, he asked

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me what made it move. By now, Gruber was becoming disingenous. Without waiting for a response, he proposed that the movement of the water was caused by great unseen fish, fanning it along with their tails. He watched me closely. Then why couldn't we see them? I asked in a hectoring, inquisitorial way. Oh, he replied airily, they were swimming too deep. I thought for a moment. Since he had started to parody me, the most effective tactic I could adopt, the natural course of action, was for me to impersonate him. I asked him, in the manner of a legal counsel, if he saw the anglers along the bank. He replied that he did. Would the river not go slower, I asked, if many of the fish in it were caught? Perhaps, I suggested, sarcastically, if all the fish in the river were taken out, it would stop flowing altogether....

For a moment, I thought my hubris was going to bring a fall. He looked at me, considering my words with a frown on his face. Then an expression of great peace came over his features and he wrote, happily, in his notebook:

fifth stage ! ! ! etc.

When finally we returned to the apartment, we found Roma lying, propped against a bank of monogrammed pillows, sifting through the reviews of her maiden performance of the new operatic sensation, *La Boheme.* Gruber dumped me rudely in an armchair and made a rush for the doors of her bedroom, closing them ineffectually behind him, such was his passion; raising my head with the utmost difficulty over the arm of the chair, I could just see him kneeling at her bedside, fervently clasping her hand. I strained to hear, but I could catch only fragments of their dialogue. "... of the utmost gravity," I heard him say, looking back towards me over his shoulder. "... Sick?" said Roma. "Is he going to..." "Far from it," said Gruber "... an embarrassing length of time..." "For *ever?*" shouted Roma. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" "The body chemistry," said Gruber, "is quite unique... the thymus is enormously enlarged and appears to be ducted..." "What are you talking about?" said Roma. "We are unsure of the function of this gland," he explained, "but it is normally considered to be vestigial... it withers away after childhood in normal individuals, but in your son it shows no signs of doing so. Quite the contrary, my dear lady, it is highly active... it is, if you will pardon the metaphor, the conductor of his body-orchestra, slowing do his pulse rate to a quite extraordinary degree... everything, including the thyroid and pituitary glands, is performing a perfectly regular *andante* movement..." "Yes," said Roma, "but what does this mean?"

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"I don't know," said Gruber. "I have never encountered anything like this before... it seems unlikely that he will grow to normal adult size, though his brain is already that of a precocious boy of ten..."

Here I breathed a sigh of relief. At least my strategy had worked. But I had reckoned without my physiology. "His size," Gruber went on, "is difficult to predict... but unless some glandular *allegro* takes place, which could be fatal, of course, he'll probably be something in between a large infant and an underdeveloped boy. It's all quite fascinating. His head is already too large for his neck muscles to support properly and he may need supporting in some kind of neck brace..."

"Oh," cried Roma, sinking back against the pillows and dabbing at her eyes with a black lace handkerchief. "What am I going to do? He's a ... monster!" In a sudden fit of belated delicacy, Gruber went to the door and shut it, and I heard no more, except the basso continuo of his assurances, broken occasionally by a trill of renewed tears.

For three days, Roma locked herself in her room and refused entry to all comers. Her latest beau was turned away. She ate nothing. On the fourth day, the jasperine handles of the double doors were flung open, and she emerged, dressed in a cascade of yellow silk flounces and holding a parasol, her face wreathed in smiles. With a squeal of joy, she ran to the damasked armchair where I was lying more or less as Gruber had dumped me and snatched me to her. Ah, Putsi, my darling, she cried, what must you think of your Roma? Her voice purred in its lowest register as she planted kisses on both my cheeks! How *could* I leave you alone for so long, eh? The room spun below as she whirled me high in the air. My little Roma had a plan, she explained to me as we waltzed together down the Ringstrasse and settled ourselves at our sunny table at Schmidts.

The tactics were familiar to me. The more sensitive the issue, the more public the airing it had to have. When she began to outline her idea, her finger gaily crooked round the handle of a coffee cup, I objected. We rowed; goggling, a crowd gathered 'round our table. In the end, the commotion grew too much even for Roma. She picked me up and we continued in the Heldenplatz. I begged her to retain me. I asked her to put pressure on Gruber to forget about me. If she was not prepared to look after me, could she not hire someone? I was even prepared to go to a special school or a hospital. She said they had discussed it. Gruber had insisted that it was her duty to hand me

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over to medical science. He had hinted that he would blacken her reputation. She had refused, she said, to condemn me to the life of a guinea pig. Even as she spoke, I admired her. She was magnificent, heroic. I said I would rather go to a madhouse. I instanced all the poets and seers and political prisoners I could think of who had languished in jails and insane asylums and yet had retained some vision, some indestructible inner life. I would rather be like them, I said. It would not have to come to that, said Roma, hugging me to her.

We came to the statue of Prince Eugene of Savoy. The morning sun lit the epaulettes of the figure; cast from the prancing, imperial charger, a set of spiked shadows menaced the pavement. We stood in them. Equally, she said she was sure she could not give me what I needed. That was why she had hit upon her plan. It was the only way. How did she know what I needed, I argued desperately. Putsi darling, said Roma, I shall be leaving Vienna soon. I tire of entertaining these Prussian fools... I am going to Milan. Schneider will fix it so I can get Italian nationality. I shall be free at last. I cannot wait, my dear, for Italia to be redeemed; I must redeem her myself.

As she tossed her head, I smelt the freshness of the city: the sun wiping the last remnants of dew from the cobbles, the crisp sound of the cabs going 'round the square. I realized suddenly that this was our farewell scene: she, absurdly vain, operatically proud, pirouetting in the shadow of the statue; I, close to her hair, begging and whining in her ear, gazing imploringly into her face.

It was, in fact, not the last time I saw her, though I prefer to think of it as the last. On April 30, 1918, I was on my way to a physics conference in Interlaken. My train had a long wait at Milan. I looked up from the notes I was making and gazed, idly, across the platform; it was crowded with soldiers of every nationality. My attention was arrested by the coarse-featured, grey-haired woman who had emerged from the bar. She was carrying a drunken soldier on her back in a fireman's lift. She brought him to some steps almost opposite my carriage window and tumbled him off her shoulders like a sack of potatoes. Then she dusted off her hands and stood, arms akimbo, glaring down at him with a mixture of contempt and satisfaction, which began to seem strangely familiar to me. Picking the crumbs of shortcake from my velvet suit, I got down from the wagon-lit to have a closer look. Beneath that barrel shape, could it be she? As my foot touched the platform, I heard her break into an ironical phrase from

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Carmen; the cracked voice a shadow of itself, retaining only its bravura. Behind me, I felt the train begin to move. I was racked by the impulse to dash over to her and throw myself, blindly, into her arms. Almost involuntarily, I stepped back onto the running board of the carriage. As we slid by, I saw her disappear into the smoke-filled bar. Through the grimy panes, I could see her upright form threading its way through the crowded uniforms to the counter. My eye caught the flourish of scrolled letters over the door: La Scala.

I scarcely felt the breeze on my face, the lurch of the points as we rolled out through the marshaling yards, the hands drawing me back inside the train. The only feeling I had gripped me through and through: it was as if the twenty years in between did not exist. I really was at last irrevocably lost to Roma, and she to me. From now on, I breathed only the oxygen of her plan.

Three

Roma set up a trust, to be administered indefinitely, to finance The Genetrix Adoption Society, whose sole purpose was to get me adopted by a succession of the most gullible, childless, wealthy parents to be found. She foresaw that things being as they were with me, I should require not merely one set of future parents, but an indefinite number. Who knew when I sould die? Meanwhile, between situations (she said she knew the feeling, having been often between shows herself) I should need to be taken care of until I could be found a new home. The situation was the reverse of normal: usually, she explained, childhood was the transient factor, and parents were stable, but I should be permanent, and my parents ephemeral.

So it has turned out. The only constant is me, and my needs. Flesh perishes, I live on. The officials of the Genetrix, who receive me back after each life, pass away in due course; the financiers who administer the trust lay their heads low in charming cemeteries, snug beneath the snow line of the majestic Swiss Alps; but, like the money in whose service they expire, I go on from decade to decade, from family to family. Written instructions accompany me, handed down, from generation to generation, for security's sake.

Throughout all its local changes of situation, I retain one abstract impression about my life: nothing has changed, despite appearances to the contrary. Roma's plan is an archetype existing outside time that devours its particular manifestations. It has even spread its tentacles backwards, before it existed, to

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my real origins, and they have been subsumed into it. Roma herself has become a mere character in the story she began by inventing. Even as she explained the plan to me, I recognized her ambition. Here was a strategy which exceeded in wit, in panache, all her operatic roles. Here, she was not merely a performer, a lackey to the conceptions of others, but the prime mover of a life, a multitude of lives. But the opera has escaped its dimensions; it has turned upon its authoress in a casting session she never bargained for: now, even as I began to recall her bounce of delight at her own ingenuity, the image converts itself into an interior scene; her conversation freezes into dialogue; her beseechings spiral into arias; and (what might have been a memory as real as time itself) her jeweled fingers, flashing eloquently in the spring sunlight, reflect only the spotlight in a crowded auditorium.

For this reason, I do not propose to give a chronology of my travels since I left her, replete with local color, dates, faces, accents, and incidents. Declaiming the list in its temporal order would be as meaningless as writing out all the figures in a recurring decimal. I will content myself with stating the theme; it contains *in posse* most of its variations.

But how could I pose as an infant plausibly enough to take in the searching visions of couple after couple? The answer to this is woefully simple. People who are looking for something badly enough are usually prepared to find it at the earliest convenient opportunity. The Genetrix specializes in convenient opportunities. Common sense leads one to expect that self-interest would interfere with the process of acceptance. It is not so: I, as no other, find some remarkably similar patterns of behavior on the part of prospective parents. They would have the banality of a list of religious conversions. Where the experience is emotionally absolute, the stereotypes appear to be strongest. The infant life is the very center of other peoples' self-projection. When the cipher "infant" is held up before them, they see not what is there, but what they want to see. The infant is the most conventionalized object of perception in human life. Naturally, the figures per annum for baby-switches in our major hospitals are not available; but it is well known that the mother, who has carried this burden within her for nine long months, who has sweated and labored to bring it into the world, often has no means of recognizing it as an individual and is quite contented with the baby of another.

The Genetrix Adoption Society presents me in thoroughly conventionalized form. Care is taken that I

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am never seen in the context of other children. Parents are elected for their inexperience, if possible. Childless parents — inexperienced in matching their own imaginative projections with the schema "baby" — fall like ninepins. My size, in fact, has never changed throughout my long career. I have simply graduated my dress, posture, verbal and general behavior to accord with their rampant expectations. Swathed in my diapers and covered by a shawl, I instantly become an infant of piquant ugliness. My voice — since I have never breasted the tape of puberty — is a falsetto anyway. My withered member, untroubled throughout all these years by tumescence, passes credibly enough for an organ in its infancy, which, in a sense, it is. The prospective parents, carefully vetted by the Genetrix for income, property, intelligence, life style, etc., arrive at, say, the Parish office. I am displayed, asleep. They approach to get their first view of me. I open my eyes, see them, and immediately begin to cry — a tiny, pathetic, strangled wail. By reflex the mother-to-be reaches out to quell the bawling she believes herself to have occasioned. Instantly she finds, to her surprise and delight, she has done so. My timing is precise: the ensuing smile is so spontaneous it is hard for her to resist the impression of cause and effect. The belief that she will be a good mother begins to fulfill itself before her very eyes.

There have been one or two variations on this. In 1938, for example, on meeting the Countess Ouspensky in Rome, I vomited a quantity of milk over her sable coat and crushed her lorgnette in my tiny fists. These actions were carefully rehearsed, of course: it was well known that the countess already had considerable experience of fraudulent adoption. Her conventions were quite different. After months of study, the Genetrix's research committee, headed by Otto Schlesinger, decided that the most effective policy would be to simulate intransigence. Their calculations were quite correct: she saw me as the Infant Hercules, and her Nietzschean predilections were charmed and titillated. I was assured — thanks to the care with which this operation was carried out — of a serene five years in her palazzo in Florence, a period during which (despite the rigors of war) I conceived and executed my famous essay "Objections to Behaviorism."

But by far the most daring *coup* of this kind took place in the Dayton Nursing Home in Dayton, Ohio, in September, 1948. There, the twenty-three-stone Mrs. Grace Metallika, a millionairess from Cuyahoga County, was delivered, prematurely, in the presence of her

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husband Walter, of a fetus of enormous size, which appeared to be alive and well. The Metallika's were delighted with me, and I lived with them quite happily on their farm for four and a half years before they were both tragically killed in an automobile accident on the Cleveland Freeway. Otto had long wished to pull off something of this order. When the news leaked out that Mrs. Metallika would miscarry, he seized his chance. The Genetrix carefully infiltrated the nursing home; all the staff were lavishly primed. The media were invited. On the morning of September 13, Mrs. Metallika was secretly delivered by Caesarean section of her premature baby — a tiny fetus which was, as expected, stillborn. I was then inserted in place of it — "an interesting problem in heavy mechanics," said the gynecological surgeon, Dr. Raymond Spygold. For forty-five minutes I lay in the hot, slimy folds of Mrs. Metallika's recently vacated womb, the cord of the departed fetus attached to my naval by a rubber sucker, breathing through a plastic tube which descended over the neck of the cervix and protruded at the vagina. Then Mr. Metallika was called in to watch the final stages as I was triumphantly "delivered" by Caesarean section — the surgeon merely cutting his own stitches and sewing them up again.

This impersonation of homunculus is an exception, but in general the periodic regression to babyhood is quite repugnant to me. To lie, as immobile as a man in an iron lung, in a state of deliberately induced bodily incontinence, imitating the truncated motor responses, the wild, bullying eye-movements of infancy, is not an edifying experience. These early days are a trial; I dread them, like a punishment, each time they come round. Were I remotely interested in power, I should no doubt find them intensely satisfying; my slightest wish is no sooner hinted at than it is performed, with cooing servitude. Unfortunately the amount of wishes I am allowed to have, according to the laws of conventional expectation, are few indeed and limited in their range. Choice is not a great feature of a baby's life, even though one is expected to be inherently manipulative at this stage — to conduct the orchestra of one's admirers by tiny, jerky movements of the hands.

The basic helplessness of this period is illustrated by my brief stay in 1911 at the summer home on the Isle of Sylt of Herr and Frau Albrecht, a Bavarian timber contractor and his wife. Frau Albrecht became anxious: I didn't seem to be doing very well on the bottled milk she was giving me (I was of course an enormous baby). One morning

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they brought in Grüss-Gott, a local girl. With a sigh of relief, she unstrapped herself, her bosoms flopped in front of her like stretched gourds. I looked at them as I was taken onto her knee: the skin was satin with pressure; each blue nipple, leaking already like a village pump, rose decisively from its plateau of coconut matting. Frau Albrecht was smiling and nodding in the background. Before I could cry out, Grüss-Gott caught me by the back of the neck and squeezed the nearest of these machines, like a fire extinguisher, into my mouth, which happened to be gaping with astonishment. For several hours afterwards, I lay in a sticky coma, horribly real to me, but interpreted as a benign satisfied nap by the Albrechts. The process was repeated for weeks.

At this stage, I am like a man in prison, not even able to count the days in scratches on the walls of his cell; for counting, like language, is forbidden me. It is the worst form of political imprisonment: I am deprived of all human rights; I am woken every three or four hours, just when my eyes are finally closing in sleep, and forced to drink a sweet-tasting liquid, which leaves me drowsy and sluggish. I am got up. I am bounced up and down. I am struck repeatedly on the back, until I have an uncontrollable fit of belching and vomiting. My eyes stare up into an electric light. Voices whisper in my ears. Then I am put down again and left alone in the pitch dark until this process is repeated four hours later.

But infinitely worse than the physical torment is the mental and spiritual deprivation. My mind, like a fire, burns for fuel; it consumes only itself. I can feel it fading, dying down; yet I force myself to hang on, to wait until the embers of my intelligence can be revived by the kindling of babble; then, cautiously, the first dry sticks of sentences. It is a slow process, fraught with anxiety, and in the meantime I have the torment often, as I am dandled on their knees, of hearing the second-hand, inaccurate opinions of my current elders. Patiently I sit, beaming, the saliva depending in a thread from my bottom lip, enduring statements of prejudice and ignorance, confidently delivered over a vast range of subjects. Sometimes they speak of the latest developments in the literary or scientific worlds, yet in such a fragmented and muddled fashion that I weep, loudly, in front of them, out of sheer despair.

Fortunately after a month or two I can begin to leak information concerning my development, in such a way as to secure an early impression of intelligence. Here I must be careful: the impression must not be too strong, the intelli-

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gence not too great, or the credibility of the whole operation may be jeopardized. This requires two quite contradictory qualities: great self-discipline and a thoroughly corrupt imagination. The Genetrix — though examining carefully the susceptibilities of each set of parents — does not present me as a child prodigy. It is left entirely up to me to engineer this impression. How much I choose to reveal of myself is therefore entirely my own responsibility. Obviously the more of myself I can reveal, the nearer I approach the life I would have led, had all things been equal. It is a radiant hypothesis which conditions my every thought and action. Not that I am not free in this matter. I would not indulge in sentiment. But to have to raise the house of one's personality on the quicksand of calculated misunderstanding, when one has such a clear vision as I do of what living on a rock might be, creates an ineradicable reflex of frustration.

The next stage involves, mercifully, the beginnings of mobility and articulacy. Here I can liken my condition most closely to that of a man recovering from a severe automobile accident, which has damaged his mind and body, almost beyond repair, but not quite. My elders wait on the slightest signs of convalescence. I strain to achieve the sitting position, usually over a period of three or four days; they strain with me. When I finally achieve it, there is an air of celebration. They dress me in different clothes; things more suitable for one who can sit up and begin to join the human race. I am at last becoming one of them. I climb perilously onto the hood of my pram or show signs of balancing on the rails of my cot. I am rewarded by being allowed to crawl on the ground and inhabit a kind of wooden exercise-yard. I am dressed in trousers. When the time comes, I am congratulated on my lack of incontinence. The unintelligible syllables I mumble are greeted by prolonged applause and imitation. Esperanto, I find, sufficiently badly pronounced, is a good medium to use at this stage in most European countries; it also acts as a welcome salve to my injured dignity.

But how can I possibly simulate natural processes of growth? The acquisition of teeth, for example, is not a matter of convention. A creature either has them, or not; unconscious collusion cannot get rid of this fact. It is upon the consideration of details such as this that the success of the Genetrix rests. For this, Roma takes no credit; a stickler for detail in her own performances, she waved it aside in those of others. Otto and myself went over this very point, before launching me on my first house-

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hold. We evolved a system which, after a certain amount of trial and error, has proved crudely effective. I get a signal out to the Genetrix; their representative then calls at the house on some pretext or other to slip me my first set of plates. There is a graduated set of these teething gums, made by a Swiss dental engineer, with one, two, three, and four milk teeth, embedded in minute top and bottom plates. The teeth are also detachable but able to be secured by a tiny bolt no bigger than a pinhead. This device enables me to simulate the emergence of a tooth overnight, without having to change my plate.

This whole part of the operation is not without its problems. The Genetrix employs a number of out-of-work actors to impersonate a whole range of callers. Their performances are at times quite indistinguishable from the real thing. Sometimes it happens (through failure of communication) that I am not aware which caller the representative will pose as. Once, isolated in a large house outside Lyon, I began to get desperately beyond my time for teething. With every day that passed, my credibility went down a point. Impatience was beginning to make me tense and nervous. Through the window, I saw a man arriving with a sack of logs on his back. I looked hard at him. Something about his face, some shade of incongruity in his walk, told me that here at last was my man. Even as I threw caution to the winds and slipped out of my pram, I remember pausing to admire the veracity of his performance. What an accurate impersonation. I followed him down the cellar steps, ignoring the hordes of skeletal green frogs which were hopping everywhere over the damp floor. Astonishing, he was even keeping it up when no one was looking. And that coarse grunt of relief as he threw down the sack. Quite impressive. I stood and faced him, halfway up the steps, in my diapers and tiny cotton nightshirt. OK, I said, holding out my palm. Hand them over. He stared like a man in a Fuseli painting. For God's sake, I said, I haven't time for drama. I'll see you get a good reference. Just give me the teeth, will you. Then he fell, babbling hysterically, to his knees amongst the bobbing frogs. The function of this part of the act escaped me. It's all right, I said. No one's watching us now. At last, with a show of reluctance, he took from his mouth a set of top and bottom plates. A cunning hiding place too, his own mouth. I swarmed back upstairs to my room. As I went, I made a mental note to write a special commendation of this man. He was a ham, but he was good. To my surprise, when I prepared to insert the teeth into my mouth, I dis-

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covered that they did not fit. They were crammed with inferior imitations of adult molars. One week later, the real agent arrived, disguised — the cliche of it — as a gas inspector.

This affair of the teething has further ramifications in the psychology of acceptance than one might expect from a rather cheap mechanical ruse. If I am visibly teething, it is apparently more difficult to resist the probability that I am developing in other ways too. This makes it easier for me to give the impression of a marked precocity, for it becomes obvious that my speech is outstripping my ordinary physiological development. It is often remarked, for example, that my powers of articulacy are astonishing, given the fact that I have only just acquired my first tooth. This serves as a springboard for the most elevated of the delusions under which my adopted parents labor: the more remarkable my development, the more likely it is to have been caused by the environment and opportunities they have provided. Indispensable to the success of my fraud is the widespread superstition amongst parents that they themselves contribute directly to the growth and development of their offspring. There is of course a spectrum in this. Some, like Mr. Wolff, see themselves as contributing nothing more than material comfort; they are the hardest to deceive. Others believe — despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary — that they have created me *ex nihilo* (*or ex minimo*): examples of these include M. and Mme. Sauvy, the botanists of Lyon, and Caitlin and Gilbert.

But no matter how great their belief in their own contribution, it is always open to me to betray myself. One afternoon, I remember, at the age of six months, I was playing with some large educational beads downstairs in the sitting room here at Caitlin and Gilbert's house. Gilbert was watching the TV. I had just finished assembling a model of the DNA nucleus, a little joke of mine to relieve the boredom. I happened to look up from under the arm of the chair at the screen. It was a silent film (how well I recall them when they first came out); a man was being pursued by some gangsters along the top of a skyscraper. He came to the edge, waved his arms, and fell off. The next shot showed him halfway down the skyscraper, hanging on to the minute hand of a large clock, which was slowly buckling into a half-past position under his weight. My laugh (quite different in essence from my pseudo laugh) burst out a split second before Gilbert's. He looked across at me suspiciously. I stretched and forced my mouth open in a grin, put my head back,

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and laughed again, hoping this would cover my faux pas. Unfortunately, at that very moment, the director cut to a vertiginous shot of the ant-like pedestrians, forty stories below. My laugh (my cover laugh) coincided with the canned laughter of the TV audience. Caitlin, said Gilbert, come in here a moment. He didn't take his eyes off me. I decided to patrol the room on all fours and create a diversion under the table. Look at him, said Gilbert. He just laughed at the TV. I came out from under the table, pushing out my tongue and rolling my eyes like an epileptic. I tell you, Gilbert insisted, he just got the joke. They watched me. Desperately I looked around. On the mantel was an alarm clock. I pointed to it. That's it, said Caitlin. Yes, they nodded in concert. Yes, it's the same, isn't it? Same, I repeated with a sigh of relief. I could have sworn, said Gilbert. Isn't he *sweet,* said Caitlin, scooping me up with the little cry she reserved for my disappointing moments.

Then come the intelligence tests, the interviews with various overqualified members of the medical and psychiatric professions, scenes for which Gruber was an effective dress rehearsal. Usually by that time — nine months onward — special provisions have been made for my precocious aptitudes. I can spend some of my time "reading." Most of it, of course, pure show. I sit, a little later on, turning the pages of an elementary textbook, or reel off solutions to problems of specific gravity, while my mind rages with boredom and frustration at the thought of the printed matter which has poured from the world's presses since I was last able to peruse it.

At this stage, so greedy are the expectations I have aroused, that my parents sometimes begin to hallucinate meanings into my speech. In his conservatory at Lyon, while I was imitating as best I could the noises and gesticulations of a toddler, M. Sauvy suddenly formed the impression that I had uttered the name of a certain exotic plant. He begged me to repeat it. Much to my reget (it would have made things much easier for me at that stage), I could not. On another occasion, I was playing a game of chess with Gilbert, when my mind was struck by a particularly interesting thought. Rapt by the avenue of ratiocination that had opened up, I let fall from my nerveless fingers the piece I was holding. It dropped on an empty square, creating a check-mate situation. Gilbert was stunned and gratified in equal proportions. Like a child he set up the pieces again, expecting me to repeat it. This is a crucial moment: instead of the parent's favorite trick of losing deliberately, I have to ac-

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commodate myself to the reverse; I have to start winning ineptly, in order to reassure the parents that I am humoring them. As with many of these situations, the casual observer would not be able to tell the difference.

But when all these perils have been negotiated, then at last I enter the garden of delights. Soon my actual work is unintelligible to everyone around me. It is accepted that I am engaged in some important pursuit or other, but no one could tell, if asked, whether I am making sunbeams from cucumbers or designing a new hydrogen bomb. The strain becomes less, the frustration diminishes. Serenity, happiness enter my life like long-lost friends. Sunlight falls through the panes of my study window, while I sit at my desk, my mind staccato with undreamt-of projects, finishing off the ones I have already conceived.

In the foreground of my mind, I gambol on an infinite green, as unself-conscious as a spring lamb. My activities are sheer superfluity: I perform effortless conceptual handsprings, out of sheer elation. But at the back of my mind, I know it is all a race against time. This halcyon period varies in length; but allowing for accidents, fire, acts of God, etc.... on average somewhere between the ages of seven and ten comes first the premonition, then the certainty, that it is over for another life. This fragile causeway I am entered on at this moment; already, as I sit in this garden troweling vigorously in the sand, I see the wave caps of future lives obliterating the horizon.

The next stage — imminent now — is the rejection scene. In however many languages, cultures, accents, intonations, nuances, they always say the same things. You betrayed us, they shout, betrayed our trust. They begin to speak in the past tense of their love for me. Like so many caricatures of Pygmalion, they call my attention to the effort they have put into me, as if I were a painting that had gone on strike and walked out of its frame or a statue that had got down from its pedestal and thumbed its nose at them. And what (applying the principle of *quid pro quo*, all that this bluster about love amounts to) have I ever given them in return? An increase of anxiety. An unnecessary expenditure.

At this point in their recrimination, I begin to feel like a zoo, whose unique animal stock — guaranteed to draw crowds, zoologists, media, study centers, the whole supporting structure of zoological life — turns out to have been founded on a few stray cats and local mongrels got up to look like tropical exotica; or myself perhaps, stumbling down a concealed alley between the cages, changing

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from one wig and skin to another as I go.

I do not wish to enter into descriptions of how this comes about; it is as conventional and far from the truth as their earlier vision of my infancy. It can be ludicrously simple; it can happen through the impulsive application of a tape measure. Suffice it to say there is no redress against it. For a prodigy, abnormality is licensed. Precocity is tolerable (even amusing, fascinating) because it will disappear: that is its meaning, its nature. But when it shows signs of prolonging itself, when development (their language, not mine; I have never developed) appears indefinite, or worse, infinite, it becomes threatening, a monstrosity.

Puberty (or rather the expectation of it) is the blank wall which demonstrates to me my latest culde-sac. I face it now: the point of *da capo.* Stripped and humbled, lawsuits 'round my head like a cloud of bees, the time arrives for me to return to an old beginning.

Four

The curtains at the French windows have not moved now for a long time. They have taken legal advice about me, I imagine. Who can they sue? The telephone is constantly in use: there is a bell at the outside corner of the house under the guttering from which tremors issue. When the time comes, the windows will fly open like the doors of a cuckoo clock, and they will march out shoulder to shoulder. Caitlin will turn back after a few steps and shut the windows, for she cannot bear that any dust should settle on her dining room suite, especially after the maid has just polished and lavender-waxed it. But they will arrive together at the edge of my sandpit; she will give a little run to catch up, her tweed skirt brushing noisily against her thick stockings, her sensible shoes crushing the spring grass.

The forsythia is out. The scent of hyacinths drifts towards me from the sunny wall. I reach out. I can touch the air; it is thick with reality, heaving in waves against my retina, as I stretch forth my hand. Yet its particularity, its here and now, I know to be an illusion. It is shot through with lack of time, just as the garden, despite the infinite variation of its shades of green, is shot through by the spectrum, the bars of its visible cage. Was it the empiricist Locke who maintained that a trumpet sounded red to a man blind from birth? I shall be the blind man here. I shall fix it all arbitrarily — a stuck motor horn in a scarlet blare. In my pocket, against the thigh of my grey worsted shorts, I can feel the lump of my mother-of-pearl-handled, Sheffield-steel penknife.

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A flurry of stabs, and I shall be there; I shall be like a lark, trapped for hours in an empty theater; having endlessly banged against flats painted with *trompe l'oeil* bait trees, interminably buffeted against rafters camouflaged with gilded clouds, it flies in desperation to the top of the auditorium and finds there, high up in the roof, a tiny chink; fluttering, it squeezes through; instantly it corkscrews upwards, tumbling at last in a medium as real as itself.

The thought, of course, is pure melodrama, as grotesquely undermotivated as one of Roma's romantic operas. Reality does not yield so easily to ambition. The horn sounds again, insistent. Otto waits, an old man with a new limousine. Adam is paradised yet again, beating the bounds of his hedges and fences, his head bobbing up and down as he goes, absurdly visible to the wilderness; were there anyone out there so simple to imagine as a man, a sympathetic brother, squinting through his telescopic sight, inhuman mercy in his heart.

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Believe it or not, there has been an anthology of fantasy and sf stories about cats, and so it is an established sub-category. Here is a fresh and chilling addition.

Cat

by BILL PRONZINI

Benson was reading a paperback edition of *Paradox Lost,* a collection of science-fiction and fantasy stories by Fredric Brown, when the cat jumped up on the window sill and sat there switching its tail, watching him.

He looked up, startled. Not so much by the cat's sudden appearance, as because of the fact that he had just finished reading a Brown story called "Aelurophobe," which was about a man who had a morbid fear of cats. Benson had no such phobia, but he did have a hyperactive imagination; the coincidence was enough to immediately set it in motion.

He closed the book and peered at the cat, frowning. "Well," he said, "hello there, cat. What are you doing here?"

The cat continued to stare at him with eyes that were an odd yellow-gray. But otherwise it was an ordinary *Felis catus,* a big brown and white and black tom that might have been anywhere from three to ten years old. He had never seen it before.

Those steady unblinking eyes seemed full of something that might have been malice, so much so they made Benson's neck feel cold. He found himself remembering another story by Fredric Brown, in another collection, about an alien intelligence that had come to Earth and taken over the body of the protagonist's pet cat. Then he remembered a story by E. Hoffman Price about a woman who was a kind of were-cat and who commanded several male felines to murder a human lover. And finally, one by one, he recalled a string of other stories about cats who were demons and sorcerers and ordinary homo sapiens who had been reincarnated or had had spells put on them.

Benson suppressed a shiver. And then shook himself and smiled

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a little sheepishly. Come on, he told himself, those are *stories* — flights of fancy. Cats are just cats.

He got up and went over to the window sill. The cat seemed to tense without actually moving. Benson reached out a hand on impulse, to get the cat's head, but before he could touch it, it leaped away gracefully into the room. It stalked over to the couch, jumped up on one arm, and sat there flicking its tail and staring over at him again.

The cold on Benson's neck sharpened, and for a reason he could not explain he began to feel nervous and apprehensive. He had never had that sort of reaction to a cat before; he had never had *any* reaction to one beyond indifference. "Hell," he said aloud, "what's the matter with me? Cats are nothing to be afraid of."

But the apprehension did not go away.

And neither did the cat. When Benson walked deliberately over to the couch, the cat bounded off again and took up another watchful position on top of the television set.

"All right now," Benson said, "what's the idea? Do you want something, is that it? You hungry, maybe?"

The fur along the cat's back rippled; otherwise, it sat motionless.

Benson nodded. "Sure," he said, "that must be it. If I give you something to eat, you'll go away and let me get back to my reading."

He went into the kitchen, poured a little milk into a dish, tore two small strips of white meat from a leftover chicken breast, and took the food back into the living room. He put it down on the floor near the TV set and backed away to his chair.

The cat did not move.

"Well, go ahead," Benson said. "Eat it and get out."

The cat jumped off the television, walked past the food without pausing even to sniff it, and sat in front of the bookcase where Benson kept his collection of fantasy and science-fiction books.

Okay, Benson thought nervously, so you're not hungry. So what else could you want?

He made an effort to recall what he knew about cats. Well, he knew they had been considered sacred by the ancient Egyptians, who worshiped them in temples, paraded them on feast days, embalmed and mummified them when they died and then buried them in holy ground; and that the Egyptian goddess Bast had supposedly endowed them with semidivine powers.

He knew that in the Middle Ages they had been linked to the Devil and the practice of Black Arts and were burned and tortured in religion-sanctioned witch hunts.

He knew that Henry James (whom he had read passionately in

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college) once said about them: "Cats and monkeys, monkeys and cats — all human life is there."

He knew they were predators that possessed a certain streak of cruelty: they often toyed with their prey for a while and then methodically tore it apart before devouring it.

And he knew they were independent, selfish, aloof, patient, cunning, mischievous, extraclean, and purred when they were contented.

In short, his knowledge was limited, fragmentary, and mostly trivial. And none of it offered a clue as to this cat's presence or behavior.

"The hell with it," Benson said. "This has gone far enough. Cat, you're trespassing; out you go, right now."

He advanced on the cat, slowly and carefully. It let him get within two steps of it, then darted away. Benson went after it — and went after it, and went after it. It avoided him with effortless ease, gliding from one point in the room to another without once taking its eyes off him.

After ten minutes, winded and vaguely frightened, he gave up the chase. "Damn you," he said, "what do you *want* here?"

The cat stared at him, switching its tail.

Benson's imagination began to soar again, in spite of himself. All sorts of fantastic explanations occurred to him. Suppose the cat was Satan in disguise, come after his soul? Suppose the cat was some sort of plenipotentiary from another world, one inhabited by a race of felines — similar to the burro in Fredric Brown's story "Puppet Show?" Suppose the cat was a human time-traveler who had miscalculated the effects of passage through the space-time continuum and had somehow been altered in a cat form? Suppose, as in George Langelaan's story "The Fly," a scientist somewhere had been experimenting with a matter transporter and a cat had gotten inside with a human subject?

Each of those interpolations was pure fiction, of course, he knew that. And yet...

The cat jumped off the couch and started toward him.

Benson felt a sharp surge of fear. Rigid with it, he watched the cat come up to within a yard of him and then sit again and glare up at him. The ceiling light reflected in its yellow-gray eyes created an illusion of depth and flame that was almost hypnotic.

Compulsively, Benson turned and ran out of the room and slammed the door behind him.

In the kitchen he picked up the extension telephone and called the local S.P.C.A. office. "I've got a strange cat in my house," he told

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the woman who answered, "and I can't get rid of it. Can you send somebody out?"

The woman said yes in a bored voice; she had obviously had dozens of similar requests in the past. Benson hung up and sat at the table and tried to get a grip on himself. I'm not an aelurophobe, he thought. Cats are just cats. They're nothing to be afraid of....

It was forty-five minutes before a man from the S.P.C.A. arrived. Benson let him in and took him straight into the living room.

The cat was gone.

Once they were certain of that, Benson felt acutely relieved. "It must have gone back out the window," he said.

"Sure," the S.P.C.A. man said. "That's the way these cats are. Come around for a while, practically take over a place, and then leave when they lose interest. Sort of like teen-age kids, you know what I mean?"

Benson nodded and shut the window. Then he showed the man out, went back into the living room and tried again to read. But he couldn't concentrate; it was hot in there with the window closed, and the cat was still on his mind. After a while he decided he might as well do some of the paperwork he had brought home from the office — he was a minor executive with an insurance company — and got up and walked through the house to his study.

The cat was sitting in the middle of his desk.

A mixture of fear and disbelief made Benson tremble. "How did you get in here?" he shouted.

Switch. Switch.

He lunged at the desk, but the cat leaped down easily and raced out of the room. Benson whirled and ran after it, saw it dart into the kitchen. He ran in there — and the cat was nowhere to be seen. He searched the room, couldn't find it, and went out to the rear porch. No cat. Benson wandered uneasily through the rest of the house. No cat.

But he did discover one thing: all the doors and all the windows were tightly shut.

Shaken, Benson stood in the living room. How had the cat gotten back inside the house? Where was it now?

What did it want from him?

He tried to tell himself again that there was nothing to be frightened of, that he was overreacting. But that did little to alleviate his terror or to dissipate the lingering feeling of menace the cat had brought with it. I've got to find it, he thought grimly. I've got to get rid of it once and for all.

He went into the bedroom and took his .32 caliber revolver out of the nightstand drawer.

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Benson had never shot anything with the gun, for sport or otherwise; he only kept it for security reasons. But irrational reaction or not, he knew he would shoot the cat when he found it, just as he would have shot a human intruder who threatened him.

Once more he searched the house, forcing himself to be slow and thorough. He looked under and behind the furniture, inside the closets, through cartons and other potential hiding places. He walked down into the basement and up into the attic.

There was no sign of the cat.

In the kitchen again, he poured a glass of water and drank it to ease the dryness in his throat. The thought occurred to him then that he had not found the cat because the cat didn't exist; that it was a figment of his hyperactive imagination induced by the Fredric Brown story he had read — an hallucination which had turned into a kind of paranoid obsession. But he refused to accept that explanation. He was nothing if not sane, and his imagination, strong as it sometimes was, had never extended to *idee fixe* or Walter Mitty-like fantasies of personal peril. No, the cat was real. And so was the unknown menace it presented.

He turned away from the sink—

— and the cat was sitting on the kitchen table, yellow-gray eyes fixed on him, tail switching, switching.

Benson made an involuntary sound, threw up his arm and tried to aim the gun; but the arm shook so badly that he had to brace it with his free hand. The cat just stared at him, motionless except for the rhythmic flicks of its tail.

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Switch.

And sudden doubts assailed him. What if the cat had telekinetic powers, and when he fired, it used those powers to turn the bullet back at him? What if the cat was a kind of monstrous freak of nature, like the child in Jerome Bixby's "It's a *Good* Life," and before he could fire, it would will him out of existence? What if, incredible as it seemed, he himself was a solipsist who secretly wanted to end it all, and when he fired he would destroy not only the cat but himself and the entire universe?

No, damn it! he thought. None of that is going to happen. *Nothing* is going to happen.

He pulled the trigger.

And he was right: nothing happened, because the gun did not fire.

The cat jumped down off the table and came toward him — not as it had earlier, but in a way that was both malevolent and purposeful.

Frantically Benson squeezed

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the trigger again, and again, and still the gun failed to fire. The cat continued its advance. He backed away in terror, came up against the wall, and then hurled the weapon at the cat, straight at the cat; it should have hit the cat squarely in the head, but at the last second it seemed to loop around the animal's head, like a sharp-breaking curve ball thrown by a baseball pitcher —

Vertigo seized him: the room began to spin, slowly, then rapidly, and there was a gray mist in front of his eyes. He felt himself starting to fall, shut his eyes, put out his hands to the wall in a futile effort to brace his body — and kept on falling, falling, falling ....

Benson opened his eyes. He was lying on a floor, but it was not the floor of his kitchen; it was the floor of a gray place, a place without furnishings or definition, a place where mist floated and shimmied and everything — walls, floor, ceiling — was distorted and surreal.

A non-place. A cat place?

Fear blurred his thoughts, made him sluggish and dreamlike. Could it be that cats — some cats — really did have semidivine or even black magical powers? But even if that were part of the answer, why would the brown and white and black tom have brought him here —?

Something made a noise nearby. A cat sound that was not a cat sound; a shrill mewling roar.

Benson jerked his head around, and the cat was there. Not just there, the cat was all: as if it had grown to human size while he himself had shrunk to feline dimensions. It loomed over him, it filled the gray place, and its whiskers quivered and its tail switched; and when he saw it like that, he tried to move, to scramble away from it. But the cat reached out one massive paw, brought it down on him, pinned him so that he could not move; then its jaws opened wide and he was staring up into the wet cavern of its mouth and the rows of sharp white spikes that glistened there.

Cats are predators that possess a certain streak of cruelty: they often toy with their prey for a while and then methodically tear it apart before devouring it.

Benson understood then — and Benson screamed.

And the cat methodically began to tear him apart ....

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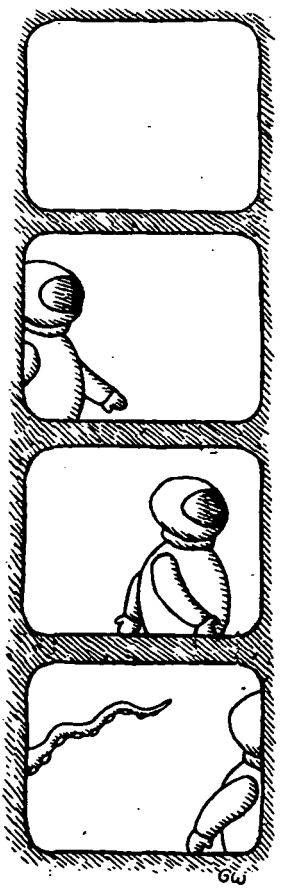
BAIRD SEARLES

Films and Television



AN ODDITY BY HOMER

I don't think I'm alone among science fiction/fantasy fans in having an almost equal passion for historical fiction. My pantheon has room for Graves, Mitchison and Renault along with Stapledon, Le Guin and Tolkien. This, perforce, leads to a passion for historical movies, and I'm a sucker for all such, from de Mille's campily gaudy *Cleopatra* to Kubrick's wise and witty *Spartacus*.

When fantasy and history are combined in the rare film with a mythological subject, I'm doubly anticipatory. The most perfect example I can think of is *Jason and the Argonauts,* for which Ray Harryhausen created sheer magic to serve a simple but imaginative script.

Alas, there aren't many like that one. A major disappointment in this curious subgenre was the '50s *Ulysses* with Kirk Douglas, which took *The Odyssey* and with what seemed like deliberate perversity, filmed it with an almost total lack of imagination. Not much of it remains in memory: Douglas being wily as all hell, some nice seascapes, and the court of Nausicaa's father portrayed as Minoan, which might be arcanely accurate but was more likely done to get as much cleavage as possible past the '50s censors.

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Recently the CBS network late movie came up with an oddity (sorry), a "new" *Adventures of Ulysses* edited down from a mini-series of *The Odyssey* made by and for Italian television about 10 years ago.

Incurable optimist that I am, I had some hope that this might be interesting. Over the past decade the British have certainly proved that the mini-series is an ideal form for dramatizing novels, having much more time for the necessary details of an ordinary novel's length without the ridiculous necessity faced by movie makers of boiling down a full length book to two hours running time. (*The Forsyte Saga* was really the equivalent of a 26 hour movie.) Nor does the mini-series bog down in mindless repetitiveness as does the usual TV serial.

So even a movie edited down from a mini-series might have some hope of detail or intelligence. The episodic quality of *The Odyssey* meant that you probably got an adventure per episode in the original series; what would we end up with in the boiled-down version?

Well, we got a flashback to the wooden horse; we got the monocular giant, Polyphemus, (de rigeur); we got Circe, the first lady to take the phrase "male chauvinist pig" literally; we got the shipwreck on Nausicaa's island; and we got the final brouhaha back home in Ithaca when the prodigal father slaughters Penelope's suitors.

And, oh yes, we got the sirens, who, instead of singing, threw their voices to whisper sweet nothings into the bound Ulysses' ear; sort of the Greek equivalent of "Hello, sailor."

There's no way of knowing what wonderful things ended up on the cutting room floor. What didn't was curiously bland, obviously trying hard to be faithful to Homer (despite seven — count 'em seven — writers credited), and there were no awful anachronisms or similar bloopers.

A major problem, as is almost always the case, was the dubbing. Even when the English translation is vaguely acceptable, the flat-voiced actors chosen to read it off spoil anything in the way of consistent characteriation or dramatic dialogue. A perfect example here was the case of Penelope, portrayed on screen by the wonderful Greek actress, Irene Papas. (What a Helen she was in *The Trojan Women!*) But the verbal whining and nattering she was stuck with made poor Penny even more of a sanctimonious prig than Homer had.

On the positive side, the costuming and hair styles were quite handsome and authentic, obviously based on Greek vase

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paintings. The Polyphemus section was surprisingly effective with a minimum of special effects. Miss Papas was often striking despite the vocal sabotage, and Bekim Fehmiu was a sturdy Ulysses. Two extraordinarily beautiful actors portrayed Nausicaa and Telemachus, looking respectively just as a mythological princess and prince should look.

All in all, I'm just as glad I didn't go through the full sequence of episodes (seven years with Calypso and nothing happening must have been pretty dull; I did miss the Albert Payson Terhune moment when the old hound recognises Ulysses and drops dead, maybe my favorite part of the whole *Odyssey*). But this version might be worth catching on an idle late evening.

More on the little screen...it was interesting to see *Phase 4* again. I remembered reviewing this story of mutated ants that could adapt to anything we could throw at them as a curious, if flawed, film that had some good moments and some excellent microphotography. I felt the same on a viewing on TV, though one of the best sequences was cut.

The same evening I caught a repeat showing of *Monte Python and the Holy Grail* and was even more struck by a certain aspect of it than I had been when I first saw it, that being the obviously thoroughly intended fantasy quality of the photography and sets. In all but a few moments when something visually silly was going on (a great percentage of the humor is exclusively verbal, you'll notice), the film could serve as a model for anyone doing a serious heroic fantasy on screen. One moment, the knights going through a forest lit by streams of sunlight, is straight out of my *Boy's King Arthur*, illustrated by the elder Wyeth, and I will always catch my breath at the appearance of the magic ship no matter how often I see it.

Better late than never...When news came through quite a way back that *The Land That Time Forgot* was being produced, I remember suggesting (facetiously) that the producers might do well to consult Frank Frazetta for the right look. Well, as everyone in the world must know by now, there is a film of *Conan* in the works, staring Arnold Scharzenwhosis, and guess who's been hired as a sort of visual consultant? Right the first time, Frank Frazetta. There may be hope yet.

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Here is a clever twist on the theme of conflict between Earthmen/colonists and alien natives. Mr. De Vet writes: "I taught school for a half dozen years in my youth, then worked in the Post Office for twenty seven years. Lately I haven't done much more than try to beat the stock market, and write an occasional story when an idea comes along that seems too good to let go by."

Second Chance

by CHARLES V. DE VET

On the bleak horizon a lonely scrub pine bucked the first tentative gusts of an autumn storm, while beside it a crescent of opaque smoke marked the location of Manatar's second moon. And against the smoke something moved.

A Manatar snow wolf!

The journey had been a calculated risk. If the Arako still harbored their fierce resentment toward the humans who had invaded their world nearly five hundred years before, Jim Joyce would be dead before he reached their villages. He had decided against carrying firearms, he had to do what he could to show the Arako that he came in peace.

His plans had not included the giant snow wolf.

Joyce squatted on his heels and slowly smoked a cigarette as he considered his situation. He knew that he had some time, for the snow wolf is an innately cautious beast and would choose its own time and place of attack. Yet attack it would.

Five minutes passed and no solution came. Joyce rose and moved out with lengthened stride along the rock wall that stretched ahead as far as he could see. Soon his fleece undershirt grew damp with gathered perspiration.

His one hope now lay in finding a break in the cliff, through which he could reach the upper plateau. Unless he found it soon, he never would, for with darkness would come the wolf. An unarmed man is no match for a Manatar snow wolf.

Joyce's hope had ebbed as he vainly sought the wall opening, then flickered anew as he spotted a group of brown and black dots on the cliff rim ahead. He unslung his field glasses and sighted a small herd of scraggly apacas and three Arako children guarding them.

For a time he forgot about the

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wolf as he studied the children. Their arms and legs were bare, he observed, their bodies covered with one-piece apaca furs that could not have kept out much of the cold. He wondered how they managed to survive in this frigid climate.

He focused his glasses on the nearest child. It had the typical Arako long forearm and short humerus — that gave the appearance of a broken limb — the single horny nostril extending from the middle of the forehead to wide upper teeth, and the shiny bone-white skin.

With a stirring of excitement Joyce put away his glasses and resumed his hike. If he could find a way up....

Another half-hour passed, with no break in the wall, but no further sign of the wolf. The cliff top had shut off the view of herd and children as he walked, but they should be almost directly above him by now. He glanced up. The head of a child lying on its stomach peered out over the rock.

Joyce made a greeting motion with one hand, but the child continued to regard him, unmoving, unblinking. Joyce returned his attention to the trail ahead.

Dusk deepened as he neared a low hillock of snow, pocked with windblown crevasses. A likely spot for the wolf to be waiting. He had no choice but to go on.

A moment later he knew he had guessed correctly as a spine of off-white fur showed above a ridge of snow.

Joyce stopped and spread his legs wide, swallowing to clear the muffled sound of circulating blood in his eardrums. There was nothing to be gained by retreating or trying to run. The wolf evidently had decided that the meeting would be here — and here it would be.

The beast rose into full view, and eased toward him, crawling low in the snow. Joyce took off one ski and held it in both hands, point forward. It was a pitifully ineffectual weapon, but a man couldn't just stand and die; he had to do what little he could to defend himself.

The wolf crouched and sprang — and abruptly the starch left its body. It landed slackly, slid forward down the snow bank, seeming all legs and open, long-toothed mouth, and came to rest at Joyce's feet. The beast was dead.

Joyce's dominant emotion at the moment was gratitude at the miracle that had saved his life. He rolled the inert body over with the toe of his boot. There was no sign of a wound, nothing that would account for the wolf's abrupt death. He looked up. The Arako child continued to observe the scene below, impassively.

A quick blanket of snow en-

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gulfed Joyce, and he made his way to the cliff and found a dry spot beneath a low rock overhang. He dismissed the mystery of the dead wolf as he unpacked his thermo bag and crawled inside, where he slept out the gathering storm.

By early morning all was calm, and Joyce spent three hours traveling along the base of the cliff before it tapered off to a ridge low enough to climb. Another three hours brought him back to the plateau where he had seen the Arako children.

They were nowhere in sight, but deep in the valley below he could see a native village — and the crucial moment of contact was near. He began his descent of the valley slope immediately, before he could think too much on what might await him.

A snow-packed trail he intersected led him to the native dwellings, all huts made of hides stretched over pole frameworks. No villagers were in sight.

He debated going to the door of the first hut and knocking or calling out, but was afraid the act might constitute some breach of tribal etiquette. He continued on down the wide formless street.

As he neared the fourth hut, a tall young Arako warrior came out and stood in the roadway, blocking his path. On the pale hawk face was a look of disdain, a challenge in his eyes, as he rested one clawed hand on the bone knife in his belt.

Joyce spread his hands at his side in a gesture meant to show that he was unarmed. "I come as a friend," he spoke gropingly in the ancient Arako tongue.

He suspected that his pronunciation was atrocious. All he knew of the language he had gotten from books. To the best of his knowledge, no living human had ever spoken with an Arako.

When the first Earth colonists settled in Manatar, their relations with the natives had been unsociable but not hostile. However, during the years that followed, as the human settlements grew and expanded, there had been occasional clashes. A few died on each side. Later, with more and more territory being taken over by the settlers, the clashes increased in number and violence. Then suddenly, like an abrupt, rupturing flame, the colonists found themselves caught up in a bloody struggle for survival.

At the beginning the humans tried to reestablish a peaceful coexistence, but the Arako refused any negotiation. Apparently their nature knew no compromise. Their weapons were primitive, and they could have had no hope of winning a really decisive victory, but they maintained a constant guerrilla

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warfare on the fringes of the human settlements. They burned and plundered and killed. Every human they captured was subjected to pitiless prolonged torture. No restraint was exercised for age or sex. Almost every day humans died, in excruciating agony.

While in theory the colonists might have acknowledged the right of the natives to feel resentment at the invasion of their planet, there was no longer any possibility of withdrawing. Most by this time had been born on Manatar; to them it was home. They fought back with sullen determination.

As the Arako continued their no-quarter skirmishing, with the deaths of their victims ever more horrible, the colonists lost what tolerance they had, their own fighting tactics grew more harsh, and eventually they decided that for their own protection they had to beat the unapproachable natives into helpless prostration.

They brought all their considerable warmaking potential to bear on the Arako. Armed troops were sent against their villages, burning and killing, meting out the same merciless treatment they had received. It has been conjectured that in those first few weeks nine-tenths of the Arako nation perished.

In demoralized disorganization the survivors fled in the only direction left open to them, the sterile mountains of the north.

Still the colonists pressed on. They followed the defeated people into the foothills and drove them into the mountains, ever deeper, their anger growing to a lust of revenge for lost relatives and friends that would be satisfied only with the death of the last Arako.

A few of the natives reached the higher mountain valleys and passes, where the task of running them down became impractical, and the colonists returned to their homes. No race or individual could survive long in the grim mountain wastes, they agreed. For some time they maintained a regular patrol in the lower mountains, to make certain no Arako returned, and as the years passed it was thought the Arako nation had perished.

They had learned otherwise only recently, when an off-course hunting party sighted native dwellings in a remote mountain valley. The humans took time then to reconsider the justice of the massacre by their forebears.

They had decided, without a dissenting voice, to invite the surviving Arako back to the gentler lands of the south. The humans would do what they could to atone for their early persecution. Whatever the Arako asked, within reason, would be granted.

How to deliver the notice of good will presented a problem.

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Joyce had volunteered to journey to the mountains to convey their offer. Now the critical moment of contact had arrived.

The Arako warrior eyed Joyce distrustfully, surveying him from boots to parka, before he spoke. "Say what you want here." His voice was harsh, rigidly controlled.

Joyce let out his breath in a silent sigh of relief. According to what he had read, an earlier Arako would not have deigned to converse with a human; a meeting was only a prelude to combat. Though that danger was still here, Joyce reminded himself.

He was glad to note that the other's language had not been too different from what he had expected. "I desire to speak with one in the council of your people," he said carefully. "I would consider myself honored." He wanted not only to avoid angering this one, but to be certain that his request was received as such, and not as a demand.

The Arako considered for a moment. "I will take you to the Father," he said then, and at least the immediate danger was past. He turned sharply and strode down the street, with Joyce following.

At the entrance to a hut — no different from the others Joyce had seen — the warrior bent low and crawled inside, with Joyce close behind. He was greeted by the odor of cooked meat, human bodies, and poor ventilation.

Joyce straightened to his knees and waited for his eyes to adjust to the semidarkness. When they did he spied a young woman, naked to the waist, with small tight breasts, and the outline of her ribs showing through pale, sweat-glistening skin. She paid no attention to Joyce as she pounded a large piece of raw meat between two stones.

He heard the Arako who had brought him here grunt in annoyance and turned and saw him standing beside an old man, with one hand on his shoulder. "The Father will hear you," he stated.

Joyce lowered his gaze. The old man was a quite ordinary native — except for one eye that cocked to the right. For some reason the eye gave Joyce a feeling of unease. He searched for the reason, then remembered something he had read in the old reports about certain of the Arako having the power of "evil eye." It had been little more than remark in one of the writings on the Arako, but apparently some believed there were specially gifted natives who could kill with a glance. It had been regarded as a power peculiar to the chieftains, possibly a requisite for leadership.

If true, the relatively small number of the natives able to use it and the long-range weapons of the

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colonists must have rendered the power ineffective in the war.

Joyce shrugged mentally and returned his attention to the "Father." Whether he was actually the young native's parent or a tribal councilor, Joyce had no way of knowing. The word covered both in their language.

"My name is James Joyce," he introduced himself. "I bring you greetings from the human Father."

He was answered only with silence.

"The human Father requests that you accept this small gift," Joyce tried again. He dug a compass-dial watch from a pocket and held it out to the old man.

The chieftain accepted the present gravely and raised his head to look at the Arako warrior. Neither face betrayed any emotion as they exchanged glances.

During the next several minutes Joyce explained tactfully the purpose of his visit, doing his best to phrase his words in such a way as to exhibit no condescension. "We desire only to learn the means of arriving at mutual understanding and friendship," he concluded.

"It will be seen," the old man said at the end, nodding several times. He let his narrow-boned chin rest on his shriveled chest. His eyes closed tiredly.

Joyce's first thought was that he had been dismissed, and he made a motion to rise. He had remained on his knees all this while, realizing instinctively that it would help in his effort to appear properly respectful.

At this movement the young Arako straightened, an expression of stern reproof on his face. Puzzled, Joyce slumped back to his position of waiting.

After several minutes the old man's eyes opened. By now Joyce could see better in the dim light, and it seemed to him that the black eyes were glazed. They returned quickly to normal, however. "They will come," the aged chieftain said. "At the third sunset."

The conference was over.

Joyce spent the remainder of the long afternoon wandering about the Arako village. There were less than a hundred huts in the group, but he understood that there were other villages in other valleys. Nevertheless, the stringent environment made it doubtful that the Arako could number more than a few thousand.

Their way of life, it appeared, was frugal almost beyond conception, their livelihood largely dependent on the domesticated apacas and the wild animals they were able to bag. All were thin to the point of emaciation, but must have been extraordinarily hardy to survive in these surroundings.

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The Father did not send for Joyce again that first day, as he had half expected. As evening approached he decided to return to the hut.

The young woman he had seen earlier was crouched over a small fire, outside the hut, melting snow. She was more fully dressed now, though her arms and legs were still bare, as were those of all the Arako.

She paid no attention to Joyce as he went up to her, but he waited by her side until she looked up. "Would the Father be waiting to speak with me again?" he inquired.

"Why?" she asked.

Joyce was momentarily disconcerted. "Perhaps he would question me," he broached.

She shook her head. "The other Fathers have been called," she answered him indirectly.

Joyce had seen no messengers leave the village, though it was possible he had missed them. Could it be that the old man had called them mentally, perhaps during the time Joyce had noted his glazed eyes? He shrugged. There was no way of knowing.

"The hunters come," the girl interrupted Joyce's reflections, and he followed her gaze to where a party of four young men carried the carcass of a shaggy antelope into the village and deposited it on the hard-packed snow. She rose, and with Joyce trailing, went over to the hunters. Several women had preceded her there. They all carried bone knives and immediately set to work skinning the dead animal and afterward carving the meat into large pieces which they gave to other women who came up. Soon the animal had been entirely claimed.

As he watched the activity, Joyce noted something that intrigued him. Until the women began cutting, there had been no wound on the dead animal! As with the wolf.

The suspicion he had had before — that the Arako could actually kill with some power of the mind — seemed true. Perhaps it was the secret of their survival in this stark environment. Undoubtedly nature's ruthless process of eliminating the less fit had resulted in all the survivors having the ability by now.

During the next days Joyce checked each time animals were brought in by hunters, and he found no evidence of how any had died — unless his surmise was correct.

The other village Fathers arrived the evening of the third day, as the old one had promised. The girl came and brought Joyce to the hut he had first visited, where he found the Fathers seated in a semicircle, facing him. "You will speak once more," the first Father said.

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Joyce told his story again, much as he had before. They listened impassively.

When he finished, one councilor turned and asked the others, "Is it of consideration?"

None answered, and after another minute of inner contemplation the oldster nearest Joyce asked, apparently to no one in particular, "Will it have weight in the Navantha?"

Again no answer. Joyce recognized the word, but it was difficult to decide its exact meaning, depending not only on context, but on inflection, lengthening of syllables, or even the expression on the face of the speaker.

Navantha meant, as he recalled, "the coming out, birth of a female child, time of rejoicing, the rising of the sun." Undoubtedly it had dozens of other meanings."

Joyce realized the meeting was over when the old men one by one filed out of the hut.

He did not see the visiting Fathers again. Neither did the old one call him to the hut. Joyce waited another day and another night, and it was time for him to leave.

He strapped on his pack and paid a final visit to the village Father. The elder was waiting outside his hut when Joyce came up. He might have been expected. "May your journey be pleasant," the old man said cordially. He had evidently known by the pack on Joyce's back that he was leaving.

"May all your nights be restful," Joyce returned courteously, and waited.

When it became apparent that the aged chieftain intended to say no more, Joyce ventured, "Is there any message I may take to the human Father?"

The old man considered this for a long minute. "Tell him," he said at last, "that we will add your words to the balance at the time of our Navantha." Joyce saw then the first sign of emotion on the aged face. It might have been kindness.

"Tell him," the old man said, "that we may let you live."

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Shinichi Hoshi is one of Japan's most popular writers, and his work often falls into the sf category. The translator, Stanleigh Jones, is chairman of the Department of Asian Studies at Claremont Graduate School in California.

He—y, Come On Ou—t!

by SHINICHI HOSHI

TRANSLATED BY STANLEIGH JONES

The typhoon had passed and the sky was a gorgeous blue.

Even a certain village not far from the city had suffered damage. A little distance from the village and near the mountains, a small shrine had been swept away by a landslide.

"I wonder how long that shrine's been here."

"Well, in any case, it must have been here since an awfully long time ago."

"We've got to rebuild it right away."

While the villagers exchanged views, several more of their number came over.

"It sure was wrecked."

"I think it used to be right here."

"No, looks like it was a little more over there."

Just then one of them raised his voice. "Hey, what in the world is this hole?"

Where they had all gathered there was a hole about a meter in diameter. They peered in, but it was so dark nothing could be seen. However, it gave one the feeling that it was so deep it went clear through to the center of the earth.

There was even one person who said, "I wonder if it's a fox's hole."

"He-----y, come on ou-----t!" shouted a young man into the hole. There was no echo from the bottom. Next he picked up a pebble and was about to throw it in.

"You might bring down a curse on us. Lay off," warned an old man, but the younger one energetically threw the pebble in. As before, however, there was no answering response from the bottom. The villagers cut down some trees, tied them with rope and made a fence which they put around the hole. Then they repaired to the village.

"What do you suppose we ought to do?"

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"Shouldn't we build the shrine up just as it was over the hole?"

A day passed with no agreement. The news traveled fast, and a car from the newspaper company rushed over. In no time a scientist came out, and with an all-knowing expression on his face he went over to the hole. Next, a bunch of gawking curiosity seekers showed up; one could also pick out here and there men of shifty glances who appeared to be concessionaires. Concerned that someone might fall into the hole, a policeman from the local substation kept a careful watch.

One newspaper reporter tied a weight to the end of a long cord and lowered it into the hole. A long way down it went. The cord ran out, however, and he tried to pull it out, but it would not come back up. Two or three people helped out, but when they all pulled too hard, the cord parted at the edge of the hole. Another reporter, a camera in hand, who had been watching all of this, quietly untied a stout rope that had been wound around his waist.

The scientist contacted people at his laboratory and had them bring out a high-powered bull horn, with which he was going to check out the echo from the hole's bottom. He tried switching through various sounds, but there was no echo. The scientist was puzzled, but he could not very well give up with everyone watching him so intently. He put the bull horn right up to the hole, turned it to its highest volume, and let it sound continuously for a long time. It was a noise that would have carried several dozen kilometers above ground. But the hole just calmly swallowed up the sound.

In his own mind the scientist was at a loss, but with a look of apparent composure he cut off the sound and, in a manner suggesting that the whole thing had a perfectly plausible explanation, said simply, "Fill it in."

Safer to get rid of something one didn't understand.

The onlookers, disappointed that this was all that was going to happen, prepared to disperse. Just then one of the concessionaires, having broken through the throng and come forward, made a proposal.

"Let me have that hole. I'll fill it in for you."

"We'd be grateful to you for filling it in," replied the mayor of the village, "but we can't very well give you the hole. We have to build a shrine there."

"If it's a shrine you want, I'll build you a fine one later. Shall I make it with an attached meeting hall?"

Before the mayor could answer, the people of the village all shouted out.

"Really? Well, in that case, we

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ought to have it closer to the village."

"It's just an old hole. We'll give it to you!"

So it was settled. And the mayor, of course, had no objection.

The concessionaire was true to his promise. It was small, but closer to the village he did build for them a shrine with an attached meeting hall.

About the time the autumn festival was held at the new shrine, the hole-filling company established by the concessionaire hung out its small shingle at a shack near the hole.

The concessionaire had his cohorts mount a loud campaign in the city. "We've got a fabulously deep hole! Scientists say it's at least five thousand meters deep! Perfect for the disposal of such things as waste from nuclear reactors."

Government authorities granted permission. Nuclear power plants fought for contracts. The people of the village were a bit worried about this, but they consented when it was explained that there would be absolutely no above-ground contamination for several thousand years and that they would share in the profits. Into the bargain, very shortly a magnificent road was built from the city to the village.

Trucks rolled in over the road, transporting lead boxes. Above the hole the lids were opened, and the wastes from nuclear reactors tumbled away into the hole.

From the Foreign Ministry and the Defense Agency boxes of unnecessary classified documents were brought for disposal. Officials who came to supervise the disposal held discussions on golf. The lesser functionaries, as they threw in the papers, chatted about pinball.

The hole showed no signs of filling up. It was awfully deep, thought some; or else it might be very spacious at the bottom. Little by little the hole-filling company expanded its business.

Bodies of animals used in contagious disease experiments at the universities were brought out, and to these were added the unclaimed corpses of vagrants. Better than dumping all of its garbage in the ocean, went the thinking in the city, and plans were made for a long pipe to carry it to the hole.

The hole gave peace of mind to the dwellers of the city. They concentrated solely on producing one thing after another. Everyone disliked thinking about the eventual consequences. People wanted only to work for production companies and sales corporations; they had no interest in becoming junk dealers. But, it was thought, these problems too would gradually be resolved by the hole.

Young girls whose betrothals had been arranged discarded old

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diaries in the hole. There were also those who were inaugurating new love affairs and threw into the hole old photographs of themselves taken with former sweethearts. The police felt comforted as they used the hole to get rid of accumulations of expertly done counterfeit bills. Criminals breathed easier after throwing material evidence into the hole.

Whatever one wished to discard, the hole accepted it all. The hole cleansed the city of its filth; the sea and sky seemed to have become a bit clearer than before.

Aiming at the heavens, new buildings went on being constructed one after the other.

One day, atop the high steel frame of a new building under construction, a workman was taking a break. Above his head he heard a voice shout:

"He-----y, come on ou-----t!"

But, in the sky to which he lifted his gaze there was nothing at all. A clear blue sky merely spread over all. He thought it must be his imagination. Then, as he resumed his former position, from the direction where the voice had come, a small pebble skimmed by him and fell on past.

The man, however, was gazing in idle reverie at the city's skyline growing ever more beautiful, and he failed to notice.

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A Checklist of Isaac Asimov's F&SF science essays, 1958-1978

Gentle Readers:

Twenty years ago, this month, my first *F&SF* essay appeared. This is an interesting statistic since in those twenty years, I haven't aged a day. (A day, no. Twenty years, yes.)

This means that the essay that appears in this issue is my 241st, for in twenty years, I haven't missed an issue.

Since I am frequently asked whether I have written an essay on this subject or that, and have even been asked if I have a list of my essays, I thought I would prepare one.

Here, then are the 240 essay-titles of the past twenty years, arranged in alphabetical order. Also included are the month and year of the issue in which each appeared, a brief description of what each is concerned with, and a number key which will tell you in which of my Doubleday collections (17 of them so far) you can find the article, if you are willing to invest in a book, or to borrow one. At the end of the list of essays, is a list of my collections by number. Note that a few of my most recent essays have not yet been collected, and that a few of my very early essays are not going to be collected.

If all goes well, I will be back in another twenty years with another list.

Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
About Time	April, 1960	18	reform of time measurement
Academe and I	May, 1972	10	personal reminiscences
A Galaxy at a Time	December, 1964	4, 14	galactic explosions
All Gall	April, 1976	12	cholesterol
A Matter of Scale	April, 1967		picturing the scale of the universe
Ancient and the Ultimate	January, 1973	10	future of books
Anyone for Tens	March, 1978	19	logarithms
A Particular Matter	April, 1974	11	natural radioactivity
A Piece of Pi	May, 1960	3, 17	pi
A Piece of the Action	April, 1964	4, 16	Planck's constant
As Easy as Two Plus Three	July, 1974	11	hydrogen fusion
Asimov's Corollary	February, 1977	13	popular fallacies
Asymmetry of Life	February, 1972	9	stereoisomerism
At Closest Range	May, 1974	11	tissue radioactivity
Backward, Turn Backward	May, 1968	7	planetary rotations
Balancing the Books	July, 1966	6	conservation laws
Battle of the Eggheads	July, 1959	1	intellectual bigotry
BB or Not BB, That is the Question	August, 1966	6	origin of the universe
Begin at the Beginning	January, 1965	4, 17	counting the years
Behind the Teacher's Back	August, 1965	5, 16	uncertainty principle
Best Foot Backward	November, 1975	12	importance of technology

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Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
Beyond Pluto	July, 1960	1, 14	tenth planet
Bill and I	July, 1971	9	Shakespeare's astronomy
Black of Night	November, 1964	4, 14	expanding universe
Bridge of the Gods	March, 1975	12	light spectra
Bridging the Gaps	March, 1970	8	periodic table of elements
Bug-Eyed Vonster	June, 1960	18	particle accelerators
But How?	November, 1970	9	population problem
By Jove	May, 1962	2, 14	planet, Jupiter
By Land and By Sea	May, 1978	19	Antarctic exploration
By the Numbers	May, 1973	10	computers
Catching up with Newton	December, 1958	1, 16	escape velocities
Catskills in the Sky	August, 1960	1	views from planetary surfaces
Certainty of Uncertainty	April, 1965	5, 16	uncertainty principle
C for Celeritas	November, 1959	4, 16	speed of light
Change of Air	February, 1976	12	fluorocarbons; ozone layer
Cinderella Compound	April, 1973	10	nucleic acids
Clock in the Sky	December, 1972	10	Jupiter's satellites
Cold Water	February, 1971	9	freezing of water
Comet that Wasn't	November, 1976	13	discovery of Uranus
Constant as the Northern Star	August, 1973	11	precession of equinoxes
Countdown	September, 1978	19	liquefaction of gases
Counting Chromosomes	June, 1968	7	x- and y-chromosomes
Crowded!	March, 1967	6	city populations
Cruise and I	July, 1973	10	personal reminiscences
Dance of the Luminaries	February, 1974	11	solar eclipses
Dance of the Satellites	January, 1969	7	Jupiter's satellites
Dance of the Sun	April, 1968	7	Sun's motion across sky
Dark and Bright	December, 1977	19	Martian satellites
Dark Companion	April, 1977	13	White dwarfs
Days of our Years	August, 1964	4, 17	various calendars
Death in the Laboratory	September, 1965	5, 15	fluorine
Dethronement	November, 1961	18	changing scientific theory
Discovery by Blink	January, 197	13	discovery of Pluto
Distance of Far	June, 1970	8	recession of galaxies
Doctor, Doctor, Cut my Throat	August, 1972	10	thyroid gland
Double-Ended Candle	June, 1974	11	American energy policy
Down from the Amoeba	March, 1973	10	bacteria and viruses
Dust of Ages	November, 1958	18	micrometeorites
Dying Lizards	September, 1968	7	dinosaur extinctions
Eclipse and I	January, 1974	11	solar eclipses
Egg and Wee	June, 1962	2, 15	cell size
Element of Perfection	November, 1960	2, 15	helium
Euclid's Fifth	March, 1971	9	geometric axioms
Eureka Phenomenon	June, 1971	9	scientific inspiration
Evens Have It	August, 1961	2, 15	nuclear structure
Exclamation Point!	July, 1965	5, 17	factorial numbers
Fateful Lightning	June, 1969	8	Franklin's lightning rod
Figure of the Farthest	December, 1973	11	size of the universe
Figure of the Fastest	November, 1973	11	speed of light
Final Collapse	June, 197	13	black holes
First and Rearmost	October, 1964	4, 16	gravitation
First Metal	December, 1967	7	metals known to ancients
Flickering Yardstick	March, 1960	1, 14	Cepheid variables

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Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
Floating Crystal Palace	April, 1978	19	icebergs
Forget It!	March, 1964	4, 17	old measurement systems
Four Steps to Salvation	June, 1961	18	advances in communication
Future? Tense!	June, 1965	5	futurology
Ghost Lines in the Sky	May, 1964	4	latitude and longitude
Great Borning	September, 1967	6	Cambrian fossils
Harmony in Heaven	February, 1965	5, 14	Kepler's third law
Haste-Makers	September, 1964	4, 15	enzymes
Heavenly Zoo	June, 1964	4	zodiac
Heaven on Earth	May, 1961	1, 14	mapping the stars
Height of Up	October, 1959	2, 16	temperature extremes
Here it Comes; There it Goes	January, 1961	1	continuous creation
He's Not My Type	January, 1963	3	blood types
Holes in the Head	September, 1971	9	duck-bill platypus
Hot Stuff	July, 1962	2	neutrinos and supernovas
Hot Water	January, 1971	9	boiling points
Imaginary That Isn't	March, 1961	3, 17	imaginary numbers
I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover	September, 1966	6	origin of the universe
Impossible, That's All	February, 1967	6	speed of light
Incredible Shrinking People	April, 1969	7	miniaturization of people
Isaac Winners	July, 1963	3, 15	great scientists of history
Isles of Earth	June, 1966	5, 17	islands
It's a Wonderful Town	May, 1976	13	New York City
Judo Argument	April, 1975	12	existence of God
Just Mooning Around	May, 1963	4, 14	satellites
Just Right	March, 1969	7	square-cube law of size
Kaleidoscope in the Sky	August, 1967	6	Martian satellites
Knock Plastic	November, 1967	6	popular beliefs
Land of Mu	October, 1965	5, 16	mesons
Left Hand of the Electron	November, 1971	9	conservation of parity
Life's Bottleneck	April, 1959	1, 15	elements in living tissue
Light Fantastic	August, 1962	3, 16	lasers
Light That Failed	June, 1963	3, 16	Michelson-Morley experiment
Little Found Satellite	October, 1968	7	Saturn and its rings
Little Lost Satellite	July, 1968	7	large asteroids
Look Long Upon a Monkey	September, 1974	11	apes and man
Lopsided Sun	September, 1970	8	tidal influences on sun
Lost Art	February, 1978	19	logarithms
Lost Generation	February, 1963	3	discovery of laws of genetics
Lost in Non-Translation	April, 1972	10	Book of Ruth
Love Those Zeroes	February, 1959	18	names of numbers
Lunar Honor Roll	January, 1970	8	mapping the Moon
Luxon Wall	December, 1969	8	tachyons
Magic Isle	March, 1977	13	undiscovered elements
Making It	July, 1976	13	American technology
Man Who Massed the Earth	September, 1969	8	mass of the Earth
Mispronounced Metal	October, 1973	11	aluminum
Modern Demonology	January, 1962	2, 16	Maxwell's demon
Moon Over Babylon	April, 1972	10	week
Moving Ahead	August, 1976	13	American technology

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Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
Multiplying Elements	February, 1970	8	rare earth metals
Music to my Ears	October, 1967	6	musical scale
My Built-in Doubter	April, 1961	1	popular beliefs
My Planet, 'Tis of Thee	July, 1970	8	world government
Nightfall Effect	March, 1976	12	space settlements
Nobelmen of Science	April, 1966	5, 15	great scientists
Nobel Prize that Wasn't	April, 1970	8	atomic numbers
No More Ice Ages?	January, 1959	1, 15	greenhouse effect
Non-Time-Travel	June, 1967	6	International Date-Line
Not as we Know It	September, 1961	2, 15	chemical bases of life
Nothing	March, 1959	7	interstellar dust
Nothing Counts	July, 1964	4, 17	discovery of zero
Now Hear This	December, 1960	2, 16	echo-location
Oblique the Central Globe	August, 1977	13	axial tipping
Odds and Evens	October, 1971	9	conservation of parity
Of Capture and Escape	May, 1959	1, 16	escape velocity
Of Ice and Man	July, 1977	13	orbital eccentricity
Oh, East is East and West is West	March, 1965	5	latitude and longitude
Oh, Keen-Eyed Peerer Into the Future	October, 1974	11	futurology
Old Man River	November, 1966	6	rivers
Olympian Snows	June, 1975	12	surface of Mars
One and Only	November, 1972	10	carbon
One, Ten, Buckle my Shoe	December, 1962	3, 17	binary numbers
On Throwing a Ball	August, 1969	8	gravitation
Opposite Poles	September, 1977	13	ice ages
Order! Order!	February, 1961	2, 16	entropy
Planetary Eccentric	November, 1968	7	Pluto
Planet of the Double Sun	June, 1959	1, 14	Alpha Centauri
Plane Truth	April, 1971	9	non-Euclidean geometry
Planet That Wasn't	May, 1975	12	Vulcan
Playing the Game	May, 1970	8	Doppler-Fizeau effect
Pompey and Circumstance	May, 1971	9	the role of coincidence
Portrait of the Writer as a Boy	October, 1966	6	personal reminiscence
Power of Progression	May, 1969	8	overpopulation
Predicted Metal	February, 1968	7	periodic table
Pre-fixing it up	November, 1962	3, 17	metric system
Prime Quality	August, 1971	9	prime numbers
Proton-Reckoner	January, 1966	5, 17	large numbers
Quasar, Quasar, Burning Bright	October, 1976	13	brightness of heavenly objects
Real Finds Waiting	January, 1978	19	Martian satellites
Recipe for a Planet	July, 1961	2, 15	elementary makeup of Earth
Right Beneath Your Feet	January, 1967	6	antipodes
Rigid Vacuum	April, 1963	3, 16	luminiferous ether
Rings and Things	August, 1978	19	rings of Uranus, Chiron
Rocketing Dutchmen	February, 1975	12	UFOs
Rocks of Damocles	March, 1966	5, 14	Earth-grazing asteroids
Rollcall	December, 1963	4	planetary nomenclature
Round and Round and —	January, 1964	4, 14	planetary rotations
Sea-Green Planet	December, 1976	13	discovery of Neptune
Second to the Skua	July, 1978	19	Antarctica

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Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
Seeing Double	December, 1971	9	light polarization
Seventh Metal	January, 1968	7	mercury (metal)
Seventh Planet	March, 1968	7	Venus and Mercury
Shape of Things	September, 1962	3	shape of the Earth
Sight of Home	February, 1960	1, 14	luminosity of stars
Signs of the Times	September, 1973	11	zodiac and precession
Silent Victory	January, 1976	12	oxygen atmosphere
Sin of the Scientist	November, 1969	8	poison gas
Skewered!	November, 1974	11	large numbers
Slow Burn	October, 1962	3, 15	oxygen and oxidation
Slowly Moving Finger	February, 1964	4	aging
Smell of Electricity	December, 1975	12	ozone
Sons of Mars Revisited	November, 1977	19	Martian satellites
Squ-u-u-ush!	November, 1965	5	collapsed stars
Star in the East	December, 1974	12	Star of Bethlehem
Stars in Their Courses	March, 1970	8	astrology
Stepping Stones to the Stars	October, 1960	1, 14	comets
Stop!	October, 1970	9	birthrate
Subtlest Difference	October, 1977	19	life and death
Superficially Speaking	February, 1962	2, 14	planetary areas
Surprise! Surprise!	June, 1976	13	undiscovered elements
Symbol-Minded Chemist	December, 1966	6	atomic symbols
Terrible Lizards	August, 1968	7	dinosaurs
T-Formation	August, 1963	3, 17	large numbers
Thalassogens	December, 1970	9	common liquids
That's About the Size of It	October, 1961	2, 17	animal extremes of size
That's Life	March, 1962	2, 15	life and non-life
Thin Air	December, 1959	1, 16	upper atmosphere
Thinking About Thinking	January, 1975	12	IQ tests and intelligence
Third Liquid	October, 1975	12	melting points of elements
Those Crazy Ideas	January, 1960	1	creativity
Three-D Molecule	January, 1972	9	molecular structure
Through the Micro-Glass	February, 1973	10	micro-organisms
Time and Tide	May, 1966	5, 14	tidal effects
Times of our Lives	May, 1967	6	time-zones
Titanic Surprise	July, 1975	12	world-sizes in Solar system
Tools of the Trade	September, 1960	3, 17	pi
To Tell a Chemist	May, 1965	5, 15	Avogadro's number
To the Top	September, 1976	13	American technology
Toward Zero	October, 1978	19	absolute zero
Tragedy of the Moon	July, 1972	10	ancient astronomic theory
Triumph of the Moon	June, 1973	10	influence of Moon on life
Trojan Hearse	December, 1961	2, 14	Trojan asteroids
Twelve Point Three Six Nine	July, 1967	6	popular beliefs
Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star	October, 1963	3, 14	white dwarfs
Twinkle, Twinkle, Microwaves	May, 1977	13	discovery of pulsars
Two at a Time	July, 1969	8	perturbations
Ultimate Split of the Second	August, 1959	2, 16	ultra-short time periods
Uncertain, Coy and Hard to Please	February, 1969	7	feminism
Uneternal Atoms	March, 1974	11	natural radioactivity
Unlikely Twins	October, 1972	10	graphite and diamond
Up and Down the Earth	February, 1966	5, 17	mountains and deeps
Updating the Asteroids	August, 1974	11	Earth-grazing asteroids
Varieties of the Infinite	September, 1959	3, 17	transfinite numbers
View from Amalthea	December, 1968	7	Jupiter's satellites

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Title	*Issue*	*Collection*	*Subject*
Water, Water, Everywhere	December, 1965	5, 17	oceans
Week Excuse	June, 1972	10	calendar reform
Weighting Game	April, 1962	2, 15	atomic weights
Welcome, Stranger	November, 1963	4, 15	noble gas compounds
We Were the First That Ever Burst	June, 1978	19	oceanic exploration
Who's Out There?	September, 1963	18	extraterrestrial life
Wicked Witch is Dead	August, 1975	12	women and aging
World: Ceres	September, 1972	10	large asteroids
Worlds in Confusion	October, 1969	8	Velikovsky's theories
Wrong Turning	September, 1975	12	retrograde satellites
You, Too, Can Speak Gaelic	March, 1963	3, 15	chemical nomenclature

Key to Location of Essays in Collections

1 - Fact and Fancy
2 - View from a Height
3 - Adding a Dimension
4 - Of Time and Space and Other Things
5 - From Earth to Heaven
6 - Science, Numbers and I
7 - The Solar System and Back
8 - The Stars in their Courses
9 - The Left Hand of the Electron
10 - The Tragedy of the Moon
11 - Of Matters Great and Small
12 - The Planet That Wasn't
13 - Quasar, Quasar, Burning Bright
14 - Asimov on Astronomy
15 - Asimov on Chemistry
16 - Asimov on Physics
17 - Asimov on Numbers
18 - (to be left uncollected)
19 - (to be included in a future volume)

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FIFTY MILLION BIG BROTHERS

In preparing the index-list of my twenty years of essays, which you'll find elsewhere in this issue, I became particularly aware that seven of my early essays were never included in any of the collections I have periodically published with Doubleday.

In each case, it was because, for one reason or another, I was dissatisfied with the essay.

Yet it offends my sense of neatness to leave matters so. If a particular essay was, in my own mind, unsatisfactory, and if the subject matter is not completely unimportant, then, after a suitable interval, ought I not to try again, doing better this time?

The seventh and last of my uncollected essays was "Who's Out There?" which appeared in the September 1963 F&SF, a little over fifteen years ago. It dealt with the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe, and this is a subject which has not faded away in the years that have passed. Indeed, NASA is proposing to spend five years and twenty million dollars to search the heavens for signals that are neither perfectly regular nor perfectly random and that may therefore be of intelligent origin.

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

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What are NASA's chances at success?

May I celebrate the beginning of my 21st year as resident essayist at this magazine by tackling this subject once again?

In order to come up with an answer to my question as to NASA's chances, I will have to make several assumptions. The two most basic (and perhaps quite debatable) assumptions are these:

1) The only life that exists is life-as-we-know-it; that is, life based on nucleic acids and proteins doing their thing against a water background. This is not really a very restrictive assumption. Our experience on Earth shows that a wide variety of life has existed on this one planet — tens of millions of species with a bewildering array of enormous surface differences — all of which are basically similar on the biochemical level. Undoubtedly there is sufficient room for variety to allow an equal array of species on every planet of every star in the Universe with no exact duplications anywhere.

But why can't we allow variations in the basic pattern, too? A background of liquid ammonia, or liquid silicones, or liquid hydrogen; complex molecules of fluorocarbons or silicates? (See "Not as We Know It," September 1961.) Or, for that matter, why not gaseous life, solid life, nuclear-reaction life, or pure mind-life?

We can postulate these if we wish, but there is no single scrap of evidence for the existence of any of these things, and to speculate in the absence of any evidence at all is to produce something so undisciplined that any answer is possible. And where any answer is possible, all answers are meaningless.

The value of assumption-1 is that we can eliminate from consideration any environment that is incompatible with our kind of life. This allows us to eliminate many environments for known reasons and therefore tends to give our final conclusions meaning.

2) The situation on Earth is average. It has in no way followed an unlikely course, either by taking advantage of an unbelievably lucky break, or by falling prey to an unbelievably unlucky break.

Mind you, this, too, is an assumption. We have no reason to think that the situation on Earth is average, but no reason to think that it is not average, either. If it is average, however, we can make certain estimates. If it is not, then we must be at such a loss to decide in what way it is not average and to what an extent — that again we can decide anything, and, therefore, nothing.

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Now we are ready to begin.

By assumption-2, we can decide that life must begin, as it did here, somewhere in the neighborhood of a star which can supply the necessary energy for the formation and maintenance of life. By assumption-1, we decide that the star in question must be something like the Sun in nature, for only so can our form of life be maintained.

The Sun is a star of moderate size. There are dim, cool stars with masses as little as 1/50 that of the Sun, and there are brilliant, hot stars with masses as much as 50 times that of the Sun.

A star with a small mass delivers very little energy compared to that delivered by the Sun. For a planet to receive enough energy from a small star for the needs of life, it would have to be in a close orbit, circling the star at a distance of perhaps as little as 150,000 kilometers (90,000 miles).

While energy delivered varies inversely as the square of the distance, the tidal effect varies inversely as the cube of the distance. This means that by the time a planet has approached its star closely enough to get the energy it needs, it is getting far too much tidal effect. The planet's rotation will be slowed until it faces one side always to the star — ending up with a hot side, a cold side, and, probably, not much in the way of an atmosphere.

A star with a large mass has a short lifetime on the main sequence between the time it first forms and the time it expands to a red giant. Our experience on Earth is that it takes a long time for an intelligent species to develop, and if this is so more or less everywhere (assumption-2) then it is useless to expect intelligent life in the neighborhood of large, hot stars.

We therefore end up looking for Sun-like stars, those with masses not less than 0.4 times that of the Sun and not more than 1.5 times that of the Sun.

Our first question, then, is: How many Sun-like stars are there in the Universe?

It is hard to answer this question because we don't really know how many stars of all kinds there are in the Universe. The stars are collected into galaxies, and our telescopes show us many millions of galaxies, but there are undoubtedly many millions of others that we do not see. The most liberal estimate I have seen of the total number of galaxies in the Universe is 100,000,000,000, in which case the total number of stars must be of the order of magnitude of thousands of billions of billions, but with a wide possible variation to allow for our very uncertain knowledge of the actual total number of galaxies.

To get a more meaningful number, let's limit ourselves to our own

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Milky Way Galaxy. For one thing, the possible intelligent life-forms in other galaxies are at a distance from us of anywhere from millions to billions of light-years. Intelligent life-forms within our own Galaxy, however, are, at most, 150,000 light-years away. It is reasonable to suppose, then, that the intelligent life in our own Galaxy is much more likely to be of importance to us than intelligent life elsewhere.

Besides, any conclusions we can come to about our own Galaxy will hold also, on the average, for all the other galaxies, by a natural extension of assumption-2.

If we concentrate on our own Galaxy, then, its total mass, according to the latest estimate I have seen is 200,000,000,000 times that of our Sun. A third of that is liable to be in the form of dust and gas, which means that the starry portion of the Galaxy has a mass of 140,000,000,000 Suns. The mass of the Sun-like stars is only about one-tenth of the total mass, or 14,000,000,000 Suns.

Since the Sun-like stars are individually about equal to the Sun in mass, there are 14,000,000,000 Sun-like stars in the Galaxy.

One thing I didn't do in 1963 was to make allowance for the position of the Sun-like stars in the Galaxy, since at that time all parts of the Galaxy seemed equally hospitable (or inhospitable) to life.

We no longer think so.

In 1963, the quasars, just discovered, were still a complete mystery. That mystery has by no means been resolved even now, but there is a growing consensus that the quasars are galaxies with extremely active and brilliant centers. They are so far away that the galaxies themselves cannot be seen even in our best telescopes, but those blazing centers show up for all the world like faint stars (and would be interpreted as nothing more than such, were it not for the tell-tale evidence of microwave emission and enormous red shifts).

But if quasars are galactic centers blazing with the light of a hundred ordinary galaxies (as they must be, to be visible at the enormous distances of from 1 to 10 billion light-years) something very unusual and violent must be going on in those centers.

As a matter of fact, galactic centers everywhere have come to seem wild places. Our own Galaxy, for instance, has a very active microwave source confined to a very small area in the sky, and a dramatic explanation of this is to suppose that there is a monster black hole at the Galactic center, one with a mass equal to 100,000,000 Suns and therefore 1/2000 the mass of

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the entire Galaxy. It is growing, naturally, and may be gulping down whole stars, when such stars have motions that spiral them in too closely to the all-embracing maw of the black hole.

It may be that black holes naturally form wherever stars are densely packed, as at the centers of galaxies, or, to a lesser extent, at the centers of globular clusters. It has even been suggested that galaxies form in the first place about black holes; that each galaxy is an accretion disk about a black hole.

Black holes or not, the increasing evidence of violent activity in the centers of galaxies, including our own, would make it appear that galactic nuclei are inhospitable to life. The radiation level would be too high.

This means that life would be possible only in the quiet suburban volumes of the Galaxy — out in the spiral arms where our own Sun is located. Since some 90 percent of the mass of the Galaxy is located in its nucleus and only 10 percent in the spiral arms, we must consider that the number of potentially life-supporting Sun-like stars is only one-tenth the total number, or 1,400,000,000.

Naturally, a star cannot support life unless there is a planet on which the life can originate. By current theories of planetary origin from a condensing cloud of dust and gas, it would appear that, in the process of star-formation, planets are also formed in the outskirts of the cloud.

If every cloud of dust and gas condensed into a single star, that would be that. However, it is quite common for a cloud to collapse into two stars, forming a "binary." This binary may be associated with another star or two, or for that matter, with another binary or two. Binaries are, however, invariably very widely separated from any associated stars. From the standpoint of planetary formation we therefore need not consider any association more complex than that of a binary.

When the stars of a binary are themselves separated by a respectable distance, each of the stars may have a planetary system unaffected to any great degree by the other (see "Planet of the Double Sun," June, 1959). If the binaries are close together, however, any planets that form about one are liable to have such unstable orbits they will not be long-enduring, and any formed about both treated as a gravitational point would be so far distant from both stars as to receive insufficient energy for life.

Perhaps half the stars in existence are members of binaries, and perhaps half of those members of close binaries which, if they have planets at all, do not have the kind of planets that are compatible with life.

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Therefore, we can conclude that only about three-quarters of the potentially life-supporting Sun-like stars have potentially life-supporting planetary systems. The total number of potentially life-supporting planetary systems in our Galaxy is then just about 1,000,000,000.

A planetary system may be potentially life-supporting and yet may not have a planet that can actually support life.

Our own planetary system is obviously life-supporting and yet only on Earth is there life. There is certainly none on the Moon, for we have looked. There is almost certainly none on Mars, for our machines have looked. The environments on the remaining planets are sufficiently hostile (by assumption-1) to make it seem quite likely that they do not contain life, either.

Furthermore, Earth itself would easily have been non-habitable if it were somewhat smaller or larger than it was, or somewhat closer to the Sun or farther from it, or if its orbit about the Sun were a little more eccentric, or its period of rotation were a little longer, or its axial tip were a little more pronounced.

In this respect, then, assumption-2, that Earth is average, cannot possibly be maintained. Every significant change in Earth's size, structure, location or motion, would seem for the worse. Granted that this may be only a matter of appearance since life is adapted to the situation on Earth exactly as it is; yet, considering the fragility of the nucleic acid/protein system it is hard to believe that there isn't considerable truth beyond the appearance, too. After all, Venus, Mars and the Moon, which are worlds that are not enormously different from Earth, do not carry life.

With Earth not average, but at a favorable extreme, could we suppose that every potentially life-supporting planetary system would, like the Solar system, have an Earth-like planet? That would be a height of inadmissable optimism.

It would, on the other hand, be the depth of inadmissable pessimism to suppose that no potentially life-bearing planet would appear anywhere else and that only here on Earth itself, in all the Galaxy, would we encounter a planet that had the good fortune to hit all the requirements bull's-eye (or at least, sufficiently near bull's-eye as made no difference).

The truth is most likely to be somewhere between 0 and 1 Earth-like planet per planetary system, but where between? There is absolutely no way of telling. We can only guess, and my own guess is one Earth-like planet for every ten planetary systems. We can call this assumption-3 in

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my line of argument, though it is a far less all-embracing one than the first two.

If this is true, then the number of Earth-like planets, suitable for life in this Galaxy comes to 1,000,000,000 X 0.1, or 100,000,000.

A planet may be suitable for life and yet not bear life. It is very tempting to think of life as something miraculous, and the product of divine creation. Even those relatively few people who are willing to suppose life to be the result of an accidental concatenation of atoms, can be so overwhelmed by the utter complexity and versatility of present life as to assume that the probabilities of such an accidental origin are incredibly low. They might even suspect that however many Earth-like planets there might be, it would be on Earth only that life would occur.

This, too, strikes me as the inadmissable depths of pessimism and here we have observational evidence to demonstrate its inadmissability.

Beginning in 1955, chemists have experimented with mixtures of simple chemicals of the sort there is every reason to suppose existed on Earth in primordial times prior to the advent of life. If this mixture were subjected to the kind of energy to which the primordial Earth was subjected — from the Sun, from volcanic heat, from lightning, from radioactivity — then in a matter of days or weeks, more complicated chemicals were built up. These complicated chemicals could be used as starting points and then still more complicated chemicals were built up.

Even the most complicated chemical formed in this fashion is at an enormous distance from even the simplest recognized form of life, but they point in the right direction. Amino acids are formed, nucleotides, adenosine triphosphate, even protein-like molecules. If we can do that in small vessels in weeks, what can be done in an entire ocean in a million years?

Nor is this merely the unconscious predilection of scientists who might unconsciously arrange an experiment in such a way to insure the answer that would be most thrilling. In the 1970s, moderately complex organic compounds were discovered in freshly-fallen meteorites of the carbonaceous chondrite variety — compounds that were clearly formed in the absence of life and yet are pointed in the right direction even though no scientist was around to do the pointing.

In fact, even in the vast dust clouds between the stars, atoms come together in random collisions and form molecules containing up to nine atoms (as far as we have detected to this point), and these, too, point dimly in the direction of life.

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We have every reason to think, then, that given Earth-like conditions and an Earth-like chemical constitution, living things are bound to occur eventually. Far from life's origin being a miracle, it would be rather miraculous for it not to come to be.

But wait, how long is "eventually?"

On Earth, the oldest fossils (as we ordinarily think of fossils) are some 600,000,000 years old, but Earth itself, as a solid body, is 4,600,000,000 years old. For the first four billion years, no fossils were left. Did it take that long for life to form on Earth even with our planet's apparently ideal conditions for life? Would not even a tiny veering away from the ideal lengthen the time required until life never begins at all?

No, for this is an underestimate of the age of life on Earth. The fossils that first appear in rocks that are 600,000,000 years old are the fossils of very complex organisms; organisms large enough to be seen with the unaided eye, easily-recognized as life-forms, and often with shells and other hard parts that easily fossilize. Before these developed, there must have been a long history of smaller and simpler organisms, perhaps one-celled in nature, the traces of which are much fainter and more subtle than that of ordinary fossils.

The faint and subtle traces have been found, and microorganisms have been traced back in rocks that are well over three billion years old. When Earth was only a billion years old, it was teeming with life, and it is very possible that life formed no later than half a billion years after the Earth had formed.

The average period of time during which a Sun-like star remains on the main sequence is about ten billion years.

Before a star arrives on the main sequence, it is merely a mass of condensing dust and gas, while the planets themselves are merely coalescing bodies. There is no life then.

After a star leaves the main sequence, it expands into a red giant, frying to death any life-bearing planet that circles it.

The average period of time during which an Earth-like planet can support life, then, is ten billion years.

The various Earth-like planets in the Galaxy are bound to be of different ages, since stars have been forming all through the history of the Galaxy. Some are forming right now, and some will be forming a billion years from now.

If we assume that stars and planets have been forming in the Galaxy at

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a constant rate (probably not quite true), we can say that 5 percent of the Earth-like planets have expended less than 5 percent of their lifetime by now; 15 percent have expended less than 15 percent of their lifetime, and so on.

If life appeared on Earth half a billion years after its formation, and if this is an average event (by assumption-2) and likely to happen, give or take a few million years, on all Earth-like planets, then any Earth-like planet older than half a billion years would have life upon it in some stage of development.

Half a billion years is 5 percent of a life-supporting planetary lifetime, and only 5 percent of such planets are therefore less than half a billion years old. That means that 95 percent of all the Earth-like planets suitable for life, or 95,000,000, possess life, while the remaining 5,000,000 planets are crawling with chemicals on the way to life.

It may be that 95,000,000 independent life-systems in our own Galaxy sounds like a great deal, but it means that only one out of every 1,500 stars in the Galaxy shines down on a life-bearing planet.

Life in itself is something, but it is not enough. What we are talking about is intelligent life.

On how many life-bearing planets does intelligence develop? Specifically, on how many life-bearing planets does a species develop which is capable of constructing a technological civilization.

If we think of it, it is bound to take a long time. Intelligence is a valuable thing, but it is not usually the key to survival. Sheer fecundity is usually counts. The intelligent gorilla doesn't do as well as the less intelligent but more-fecund rat, which doesn't do as well as the still-less-intelligent but still-more-fecund cockroach, which doesn't do as well as the minimally-intelligent but maximally-fecund bacterium.

Therefore, we might expect that evolution will curve in the direction of fecundity rather than intelligence. If intelligence does develop in some odd by-way, it is only in combination with a few other things like hands and good vision that it can reach the point where it can begin to make up for poor fecundity. If intelligence reaches the point where its owner is capable of changing the environment to suit himself, then and only then does it have a chance to become overwhelming. The early hominids just managed to squeak past that critical point, and perhaps only with the development of fire and the stone-tipped spear did intelligence begin to show what it could do.

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It took 4.6 billion years for intelligence to pass the critical point on Earth and for a technological civilization to become possible. That means roughly 50 percent of the lifetime of Earth as a habitable planet.

If we go by assumption-2 and suppose that this has happened, give or take a few hundred million years, on other life-bearing planets as well, then we can conclude that on half the life-bearing planets a species has arisen intelligent enough to establish a technological civilization.

Since we have calculated that there are 100,000,000 planets that bear life or are about to bear life, and since half of them have reached or passed the midpoint of their lives, assuming a constant rate of formation of planetary systems, there has been time for no less than 50,000,000 technological civilizations to have come into being in our Galaxy.

Our own technological civilization has only been in high gear since the 1770s, with the invention of a practical steam-engine. Considering how far we have come in 200 years, consider how far we might come in another thousand years. We would by then surely have a technology far beyond the present.

A thousand years, however, is only a five-millionth of a planetary lifetime. All but ten of the technological civilizations would be more than a five-millionth of a planetary lifetime older than us, and we might as well say that there are 50,000,000 technological civilizations in the Galaxy that have come into being long enough in the past to be, at present, far more advanced than we are.

We can conclude, then, on the basis of experiment, observation, and three assumptions, that we ourselves, who are just emerging from childhood, are trying to contact 50,000,000 big brothers out there.

— But wait, there's still one more factor to consider; one that is, perhaps, the most important of all; and for that, alas, we'll have to wait for next month.*

If serialized fiction can end an installment with a cliff-hanger, so can my essays.

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Ed Wellen's latest is a first rate story that moves at express-train speed, is full of suspense and action, and concerns the adventures of Lieutenant Stonewall J. Buckmaster, on assignment to the 10th Experimental Company, and don't ask what they do . . .

Goldbrick

by EDWARD WELLEN

Always provide a golden bridge for a fleeing enemy. —Gen. Sun Tzu

The knight came to the place where Arthur and Owain were seated at chess. They perceived that he was harassed and vexed and weary. The youth saluted Arthur and told him that the Ravens of Owain were slaying his young men and attendants. Arthur looked at Owain and said:

"Forbid thy Ravens."

"Lord," answered Owain, "play thy game." — "The Dream of Rhonabwy," translated from the Welsh of the *Mabinogion* by Lady Charlotte Guest.

The battle is everlasting and can do without the pomp of actual armies and of trumpets. — Jorge Luis Borges, "A Page to Commemorate Colonel Suárez, Victor at Junín," in *Selected Poems 1923-1967*, edited by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, translated by Alastair Reid, New York, Delacorte, 1970

It is the cold glitter of the attacker's eye, not the point of the questing bayonet, that breaks the line. — Gen. George S. Patton, Jr.

I do like to see the arms and legs fly. — Brig. Gen. George Patton III

I'm used to a structured organization and this civilian process is so doggone nebulous. — Gen. William C. Westmoreland

Moreover, remember that in the game of atomic warfare, there are no experts. — Norbert Wiener, *God and Golem, Inc.*, M.I.T. Press, 1964

We have met the enemy, and they is us. — Pogo

1. NLD Not in line of duty

Someone hawked. Otherwise, all quiet along the Potomac.

Then Stonewall J. Buckmaster grew aware of Maggie Fubb nudging him. Sleepily he pawed her. She hissed through her teeth and turned to her side of the bed and clicked the light on under the ballerina lampshade.

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"'Ten-*hut!*"

He blinked wide awake, then smiled and prepared to make love again. But she sounded off again in a parade ground voice, and he saw that though she spoke to him she looked past him.

"Wipe that smile off your face, Lieutenant. By God, when your superior officer enters the room, you jump to attention."

Lt. Buckmaster shut his eyes to make it all a dream, then opened them and looked around slowly. It was no dream. Col. Maximilian Fubb stood gazing down at them.

Buckmaster hopped out of bed and squared his shoulders and stood at bare-assed attention. Col. Fubb waved a hand at him in a small weary gesture.

"At ease, Lieutenant."

Col. Fubb stood at parade rest, only his hands behind him refused to lock into stillness like the rest of him. In the dresser mirror Buckmaster watched them milk each other. Buckmaster reconnoitered the colonel's face. As always, one eyebrow took a higher position than the other. The eyes themselves, though they fixed on his wife, who had not bothered to cover herself, did not seem to see her. He had a black head of hair but gray stubble on his face. Buckmaster had never noticed that there were so many lines or so deep.

Buckmaster waited for the colonel to sand him down. But the colonel's mind seemed way elsewhere. On his work, no doubt. Maggie had questioned Buckmaster about the colonel's work, wanting to know all about this mistress that had taken him from her. Buckmaster had shrugged. "I'm only a messenger boy, Maggie. All I know is, the colonel daily disappears into the war room. I don't have entry."

The colonel's terminator swung more to the left, putting his other eye in shadow. He spoke more to Buckmaster than to his wife, as though he had given up on her.

"I don't want you to think I've stooped to sneaking, pretending to be on night duty to trap you by showing up unexpectedly at home. There's an emergency on and it's going to be a long siege. I've come to get a few personal things because I'll be staying at the Pentagon night and day."

The colonel's hands released each other. He fingered his fruit salad.

"With the world on the brink, what's the faithfulness of a bitch of a wife more or less? Or the honor of an officer and a gentleman more or less?" He sighed. "Still, Lieutenant, just on principle I'll have to deal with you. And right away, so you won't be at the back of my mind while I'm working."

Buckmaster tensed. Did Fubb have a gun in the room? If Fubb made a move toward drawer or closet....

Maggie's breathing had quickened and loudened. The eternal bitch would love that, her husband going for his gun, her lover jumping him. The Helen complex. Men fighting over her.

But the colonel merely nodded to himself.

"I'm going to ask the computer to come up with the most hazardous duty or the most godforsaken post it can find and send you there." He almost smiled. "Think of it as getting your ticket

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punched." He looked slightly hopeful. "Unless you'd rather resign your commission?"

Buckmaster could not find his voice. He shook his head. But Fubb's eyes had shot to Maggie. Her hands were reaching out to grasp Buckmaster's.

"Stoney, stay. Fight the transfer."

"Lieutenant, if you don't take the transfer, and if you don't resign, I'll give you an efficiency report rating that will finish your army career."

"Stoney."

"What do you say, Lieutenant?"

"Fight back, Stoney. Fight *him.*"

"No more time. Your answer now, Lieutenant."

"Bring on your computer, sir."

"Get dressed and wait for me."

Buckmaster grabbed his clothes.

Maggie spat at him as he left the room.

2. NE Not eligible
for security clearance

The Pentagon Building's first floor has brown walls, its second floor has green walls, its third floor has red walls.

Buckmaster knew he was on the second floor. His mind felt blank — or at most a filled-in zero — but he knew that this timeless space had green walls. And he knew that he and Col. Fubb were striding toward the box. The box was a name for the war room, and the war room was a name for the National Military Command Center.

They were approaching the guards who had always sealed him out from that 19-room, 30,000-square-foot, highly restricted area.

"Wait here, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

The guards stood watching him, still sealing him out.

Lt. Victor Landtroop came out just as Col. Fubb was about to go in. Somewhere in there was the tank, the pastel conference room of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And Landtroop, though he walked on his toes, carried the weight of his proximity to power with becoming gravity. Lt. Victor Landtroop. You always knew just where he stood: straddling the issue. Lt. Victor Landtroop. An upper lip that cried out for a mustache and a mouth that looked as if it had never got over the shock of finding a plastic nipple in place of the real thing. But Lt. Victor Landtroop was one up on Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster. Landtroop had clearance.

He evidently jumped to the conclusion that Buckmaster was going in with Fubb. After greeting Fubb smoothly, he gave Buckmaster a fellowish jab on the arm.

"Glad to see you're joining us in TOTE, Buckmaster."

Buckmaster smiled easily. Never admit you're not in the know. But what the hell was TOTE? Short for TOTENTANZ? All he was going to tote was his val-pack.

Fubb had stopped short in the doorway. Buckmaster watched Landtroop redden as Fubb came down on him with all the eyebrow weight the colonel could muster. Then the colonel entered alone and the door closed.

Without moving, Landtroop put distance between himself and Buckmaster. That was Landtroop, all right:

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he could blow hot and cold in the same breath. At the O-club, Landtroop had always — "always" being the few months of Buckmaster's assignment here — tried to be one of the fellows while sucking up to the brass. Buckmaster saw that Landtroop was really sweating. Whatever it was, TOTE was big and a lot was at stake. Landtroop's face lent green to the walls.

"Look, Buckmaster, forget I said anything."

"Why, sure, Landtroop. I'll even forget you." He waved away thanks before Landtroop could offer them. "My pleasure."

Waiting under the gaze of the guards for Fubb to return, Buckmaster wouldn't give them the pleasure of seeing him look at his watch. So he didn't know just how long it took the colonel to get the computer printout that the colonel came out studying with a frown.

Fubb led him away down the corridor out of earshot of the guards.

"You're going to the Tenth Experimental Company. Never heard of it, but it seems it comes under the Advanced Research Projects Agency. So I had to stick my neck out and get you clearance. I'll have them cut the orders for you to pick up at 0800 hours." He looked squarely at Buckmaster. "Unless you feel you have an Article 138 complaint. You know how that goes."

Buckmaster nodded. Any member of the armed forces who believes himself wronged by his commanding officer and who, upon due application to that commanding officer, is refused redress, may complain to any superior officer. Buckmaster contained a grimace. Tenth *Experimental.* He remembered hearing about the men who had taken part in the Army's early experiments with radar microwaves. Whatever the Tenth *Experimental* was, it was no sinecure, no Underground Balloon Corps. He nodded again.

"I don't feel my C.O. has wronged me."

A flicker of something in the colonel's eyes.

"I won't wish you luck, good or bad. Just good-by."

"Good-by Colonel."

"Damn it, Buckmaster, you've never measured up to your potential. You've never had to stretch yourself. I've sensed that any real seriousness of purpose is lacking in you." He suddenly smiled a tight smile. "I may be doing you a favor. This posting may be the making of you. Though to tell you the truth I hope it's the breaking of you."

"Thank you, sir." I'll return with my shield or on it. Though to tell *you* the truth I'd rather return the shield.

Buckmaster saluted, about-faced, and left.

3. WP Will proceed

He eyed the drink in his hand as though wondering how it had got there. It looked like a glass of what the O-club's funny bartender called Long Binge Ale. That always went over big with the guys who had been in Nam. But Nam was before Buckmaster's time, and the drink tasted as flat as the joke.

The world was flat too. He had blown it. And for what: handy sex, a face and a figure, a tease and a dare.

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Be different if he really loved Maggie Fubb. No sacrifice too great. Beau Geste.

But it was a dull watery world he saw as he drained his glass. From a cushy job at the Pentagon to the Tenth Experimental. Even Col. Fubb, who knew everything about anything Army, had never heard of it. No chance for advancement in a nothing outfit. Good chance he wouldn't survive whatever probing and prodding of natural forces the Tenth Experimental was into.

He looked around the O-club. He had put off returning to BOQ. Packing would not take long. Besides, he had wanted to find out about Col. Fubb's world-on-the-brink emergency. If there was a chance of seeing action, he would go for an Article 138 after all and fight for transfer to a line company. Rather that than the Tenth Experimental. If there were rumors, the rumors would try their wings here.

But there were none on that scale. And there was nothing in the papers or on radio or television about an emergency, nothing about the world being on the brink any more than usual.

Mock-heroics on the colonel's part? He wasn't the type. But then he hadn't seemed the cuckold type. Maybe he had got wind of the affair, had sneaked back home, but had wanted to save face in his own bedroom.

Buckmaster all at once found himself in the talons of rumor. The funny bartender worked his way down from the other end of the bar — was that Landtroop moving away toward the john? — and gave Buckmaster a shake of the head and a shake of the hand and a shake of a cocktail.

"Sorry to hear they're shipping you out to the boondocks, Lieutenant. It ain't as bad as if it happened in wartime, though. I remember back in Naples, Italy, during World War II there was this light colonel, XO of CWS in Peninsular Base Section, and there was this tech sergeant under him, and both went for the same signorina. Young thing and sweet: you know, a pretty little girl that cleaned the office. The light colonel transferred the tech sergeant to Anzio, which, if you recall your ancient history, was a hot beachhead."

Buckmaster felt his face fire up, but he smiled.

"I get the analogy, Joe. Call me Uriah."

"Who?"

"Heap big chief."

"Lieutenant, you've had too much or not enough."

True. The analogy was faulty. The colonel was the husband and he was the interloper. He eyed the sign on the bar mirror. *Notice, because of shortage, no more than 5 gals to a customer.* Not enough. But he would do his best to make do.

Doing his best, some timeless time later, he found it was time to refreshen his drink. He turned away from watching two or four men bat the blip back and forth in a coin-operated video game, and he bumped into Brig. Gen. Fabian Hackstaff (Rtd.).

In World War II, clerical error long-johnned for Arctic service a massive troop shipment heading for Saudi Arabia. The man in charge won kudos

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for throwing the enemy off. Hackstaff was that man and welcomed every opportunity to revisit the scene of his triumph and to recount his exploit.

"Sorry, sir, did I spill your drink? If I may, sir."

He took the general's glass and handed it to Joe for a refill along with his own and brought it back to the general. The general eyed him sharply.

"Seen you before."

"Perhaps, sir. But we haven't met." He had made a point of avoiding the old pest. "Name's Buckmaster."

"Knew it. Thought the face looked familiar. Family face. Remember your old man, Buckmaster. Too bad. He had a fine career ahead of him. If only he had toed the line."

Somehow Lt. Victor Landtroop was standing shoulder to shoulder with them and was part of the conversation.

"What happened, Buckmaster?" Landtroop's voice said Landtroop knew the answer to Landtroop's question.

Buckmaster spoke tonelessly. "They let him resign rather than face charges under Articles 133 and 134 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice."

Landtroop snickered. "What did he do? Cheat at cards or bingo, fail to pay debts, commit adultery, drink with enlisted men, exhibit an American flag with a peace symbol on his shirt, possess alcoholic beverages in a public place, or commit a bestial act with a chicken?"

Buckmaster smiled and mentally decked Landtroop. The imaginary blow was such a solid one that he opened his fist and worked the fingers in pleasurable pain. But it was the general who had stared Landtroop into retreat. Too bad. Too slow. A good unhushable brawl at the O-club would have been one way of stopping transfer to the Tenth Experimental, at least for the time being.

The general was eyeing him approvingly.

"You handled yourself well, Buckmaster. Maybe I can put a word in for you. What's your unit?"

Buckmaster told him. The general shook his head.

"Never heard of it. Can't help you there. But I can give you some advice. Apply yourself. Luck may determine who gets the chance. But the one thing I've learned is that character determines which ones can hack it and which ones can't. So learn to toe the line. If you want to get to the top, that's the tipoff. Remember: peacetime is the professional soldier's most trying time."

"I know just what you mean, General." He spoke very clearly. "Shunsign shoulders."

The general gave him a look and dismissed him, turning away to deploy caviar on a cracker. Landtroop bounced back. He held out the olive branch in the form of a martini. He clinked glasses with Buckmaster.

"Luck to you, Buckmaster." He leaned toward Buckmaster. "Say, just where is and what is the Tenth Experimental Company?"

Evidently he had hung around in earshot. Buckmaster gave him a thin smile, scarcely skin deep, and slowly poured out onto the floor the martini Landtroop had handed him. Landtroop

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had to dance backward.

"Landtroop, so far I haven't been able to make up my mind about you. I'm still not sure whether you're a small-bore bore or a large-bore bore."

Maybe it wasn't too late for that brawl. His hand curled up in false remembrance. Landtroop's eyes darted left and right, then zeroed in on the wall clock and checked with his wristwatch, which he brought close to his eyeglasses.

"I've got to get back."

"That's right, Landtroop. Lift that bale, TOTE that barge."

Landtroop turned green again and away.

4. NLT Not later than

Buckmaster found himself sitting on a park bench. It was a steel bench. Steel benches had replaced the concrete benches that had replaced the wooden benches. Still trying to stay ahead of the vandals.

The vandals had got his father. Maybe not the vandals, but the unyielding steel of the system. You don't buck the system; you learn to use the system. His father hadn't learned. Buckmaster smiled with the family face. He hoped he didn't have the family temperament.

His father came from a small town and a poor family. Because he wore a uniform that said he was an officer and a gentleman, he was able to go into luxury hotels and plush nightspots — places he would never have dared step into otherwise — and at a ball he met a deb who danced with him all night. They married and had Stonewall — in that order, though Stonewall was aware he was a premature baby — and seemed happy. But when the Army eased Col. Buckmaster out for making a report charging that crooked and wasteful procurement policies were endemic in the service, the marriage fell apart.

They dumped Stonewall in military school. He saw more of his mother, who remarried — an admiral this time — but he went on camping trips with his father. The trips could have been fun. But his father was, if not a martinet, a perfectionist: everything by the numbers.

Always had you policing up, straightening up, yourself and your surroundings. He remembered a moment of rebellion. "I'm not your command, I'm your son." His father's long look filled a long silence. "You're right, son. It's a while since I've had a command."

Lt. Buckmaster grew suddenly aware it was March. There must have been a windstorm hollowing out space for a mass of cold air. Overhead wires dripped black icicles of insulation. He guessed he had told himself to get some air, but this was overdoing it.

He pulled up his collar and headed for his BOQ. A yawn nearly unhinged his jaw. He looked at his watch. He might be able to get in a good two hours' sack time.

5. PAC Pursuant to authority contained in

He patted a yawn and hoped the Wac would think he was a cool one.

The Wac handed him his 201 file.

"You'll handcarry it because otherwise it won't get there in time to put you

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in the morning report of your new unit. And here are your travel orders. You get a ride out to Andrews Air Force Base. A bucket seat's waiting for you aboard a C-5 leaving for Moody Air Force Base at 0930 hours."

"And from there?"

"Your destination is classified."

But the Wac looked around, then winked and pointed to a zip code number after the name Tenth Experimental Co. on his travel orders. 31905. It rang a southern bell.

He grinned his thanks, picked up his val-pack, and on his way out stopped in at the Pentagon's post office branch. He located a copy of the zip code directory on a chain. At the back of the book he found a list of zip codes for Army and Air Force installations; 31905 was the code for Fort Benning. He marched his fingers frontward through the book to Georgia and confirmed that 31905 was the Fort Benning branch of the Columbus post office. He was heading back home.

West Point had been out for him; as son of his father he had been unable to wangle congressional appointment. He had enlisted and got his OCS commission by way of Ft. Benning Infantry School. And now he was proceeding back there, to the HQ of the Tenth Experimental Co., to present himself to Capt. Romeo Clapsaddle, CO, to take up duties as XO of the unit.

If it hadn't been the military, he might have wondered why a plane as big as a C-5 should take off with so little cargo, why they should route him to Benning by way of Moody when there was Eubanks Field, to say nothing of Gunter and Maxwell and Robins and Turner that were all nearer Benning than Moody was. But it was the military, and so he shrugged and made himself comfortable.

Finding himself alone aft of the flight deck, he opened his 201 file carefully and studied his DA Form 66, the organization copy of his qualification record, standing loose inside his DA Form 201. He reddened on seeing the NE that had stymied clearance for him till Col. Fubb overrode it to send him to the Tenth Experimental Co. He hadn't really believed there'd been this tag on him, simply because his father hadn't toed the line, but there it was. In the military, did guilt by association run unto the tenth generation? He closed his file carefully.

Just in time. The pilot came back to invite him to a sit in the cockpit.

Maybe politeness, maybe curiosity. But if it was the latter, Buckmaster was able to make a virtue of ignorance. "Top secret."

At Moody AFB a command car waiting on the apron drove up to the plane. The driver, an Ordnance corporal whose name tag over the left blouse pocket spelled out Flugel, saluted him and took his val-pack. Buckmaster breathed deep returning the highball. March was kinder down here.

Cpl. Flugel put the val-pack in the back of the command car, and Buckmaster got in beside him in the front. The corporal wore wraparound shades. The long bill of the dark green hat further shadowed Flugel's upper face. There was nothing there to read.

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But Flugel also wore jump boots. Jump boots on an Ordnance corporal said that the man knew the angles.

"Corporal, what can you tell me about the Tenth Experimental?"

Flugel did not take his face from the road leading out of the air base.

"Sorry, Lieutenant." A small smile in limbo. "I only know I'm supposed to pick you up somewhere and take you somewhere."

Buckmaster had a sudden impression of being in a dream. All the sense of structure that he had sought to bolster by joining the army was vanishing. He looked around for something to hold the world together, only to find that instead of heading northwest to Ft. Benning once they left the air base, the driver headed east to Waycross. Buckmaster stared at the corporal, the wraparound shades giving Buckmaster back his own puzzlement.

"I thought the installation was at Benning."

The corporal almost let the wheel slip away from him. He fought the car back under control.

"What made you think that ... sir?"

The world was holding together again. The corporal had his place in it, and Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster had his.

"I have ways." Ah, why snow the guy? "No, it's the zip code."

"Oh." A larger smile in limbo. "No, sir. It's this way."

Buckmaster shoved his hat forward over his face and leaned his head back.

"Wake me when we're nearly there, will you, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir."

Buckmaster dozed, awoke, eyed the odometer. It had clocked fifty miles.

"How far?"

"Not much more. I was just going to wake you."

Buckmaster sat up, wide awake, reading again in his mind the directional sign they had just passed. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Could that be where they were heading? The corporal answered his look with a nod.

Okefenokee Swamp? What was the Tenth experimenting with? Alligators?

They drove through the north entrance, bypassed the ranger station. Flugel parked the command car, took out the val-pack, and locked the car. Buckmaster followed Flugel, who followed cypress boardwalks stretching into the swamp.

They stopped at a landing. A Quartermaster sergeant had a haunch up on the bow of a hydrofoil. He straightened, a big man, and threw Buckmaster a lazy highball. His name tag spelled out Messmore. He gave Buckmaster a flat-eyed stare as he got an exaggerated salute back. Then he looked at Flugel, and a smile wandered between them. Flugel gave him a questioning nod.

"All clear, Zulu?"

"All clear."

Zulu took the val-pack from Flugel and stowed it aboard the hydrofoil. He hung loose and moved loose. His grits-and-gravy voice had come out of a rich beard. Buckmaster understood that Black males got shaving bumps — pseudofolliculitis of the beard — and that the only "cure" was to grow a beard, the Army generally allowing a medical excuse for not shaving up to

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three months, but this looked like more than three months' worth. The shaving bumps could be a put-on. Zulu wore a black ring to show pride of race and looked like another man who knew the angles.

"That really your first name, Sergeant? Zulu?"

"No, sir. Miles. Sgt. Miles Messmore."

"Mine's Oscar, sir. Cpl. Oscar Flugel."

They eyed him with that same smile wandering between them, as if waiting for him to say that his was Stonewall.

"All right, men. Let's get wherever we're going. Don't want to keep Capt. Clapsaddle waiting."

Zulu laughed a warm laugh that burned Buckmaster's ears.

"Sure don't want to do that. No, sir."

They climbed aboard and Zulu took the wheel. The hydrofoil picked up quickly, sped along a maze of channels winding through big-footed moss-bearded cypress, and, making 80 knots, drove them deep into the swamp. Zulu brought them to a stop at a small island that looked little more than a hummock.

Buckmaster looked around. If there was an installation in the neighborhood, its camouflage was perfect.

As Buckmaster turned to Cpl. Flugel and opened his mouth to ask what the hell was up, he found cause to keep his mouth open. Flugel had picked Buckmaster's val-pack up and, as Buckmaster watched, the corporal dropped it over the stern. It sank. The air oozing out of it added a slow blub of spheres to the boil and burst of marsh bubbles.

Buckmaster turned swiftly but not swiftly enough to Zulu. The sergeant had lifted the lid of a seat locker and drawn out an M-16. He switched the selector to sprinkle and aimed the rifle at Buckmaster.

"Here's where you get out, Lieutenant."

"Just like that?"

"Not just like that. Like for short-arm inspection. Strip."

Buckmaster seemed to watch himself with a sense of detachment as he stripped to the buff.

"Your dogtags too."

Slowly he lifted the chain from around his neck. He pendulumed the dogtags, hoping Zulu's eyes would follow them. Snap them at Zulu's face and make a grab for the M-16 when Zulu pulled his head away. But Zulu's eyes did not follow the dogtags. Zulu's gaze remained on Buckmaster's face. Buckmaster tossed the dogtags onto the pile of clothes, along with his wristwatch and his 201 file.

Flugel buttoned the shirt around all, knotted the sleeves, and wrapped a length of chain around the bundle. He pendulumed it and let go on the upswing. What enlisted men saluted splashed into the dark waters and drowned. Buckmaster watched it vanish. Were they going to deep-six him as well? There'd be nothing to lose in jumping Zulu or diving overboard, though there was nothing to gain in dying that way but pride. Could you take pride with you?

Zulu's brow rippled in sudden pain,

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though the M-16 stayed locked on Buckmaster.

"Let's hurry this thing. My migraine's killing me."

"Easy, Zulu. We still have to take one precautionary measure."

From the seat locker Flugel drew a first-aid kit. It held rubber gloves, a can of baby powder, a bottle with skull and crossbones label, a wad of cotton, a tube of salve, a roll of gauze bandage, and a roll of adhesive tape. He powdered his hands and worked them into the gloves. He uncapped the bottle and wet the cotton. He moved to Buckmaster's side, careful not to come between him and Zulu. Buckmaster's nose wrinkled.

"Hold still, Lieutenant, and put your hands out. Just a dab of acid on each fingertip. Enough to give you an identity problem, alive or dead."

Buckmaster felt his upper lip draw up in a pulsing sneer. Rage as much as pride stiffened him inarticulate in body as in speech. He stood still and made no outcry.

Zulu forgot his migraine enough to nod approval and apparently paid for it with pain of his own. An acid hiss escaped his lips. Flugel shot him a glance.

"I'm hurrying, Zulu."

Flugel salved Buckmaster's fingers and bound and taped them. He stowed the first-aid kit away.

"Okay, Lieutenant. Over you go."

Buckmaster let out his breath. At least he was, to go by Flugel's nod, getting out on land. He jumped ashore.

The trees and bushes swayed. For an instant he thought it delayed dizziness. Then he remembered that Okefenokee meant "quivering earth."

"So long, Lieutenant. You want to watch where you walk or sit."

He wanted to call out "*Why?*" but even if he had let himself, the hydrofoil thunder would have muted him.

They taught you a law in OCS. *Any order that can be misunderstood will be misunderstood.* What order had Cpl. Flugel and Sgt. Messmore received? Had they misunderstood it? Or were they following it literally? Was what he found himself in a test, an initiation? Was the Tenth Experimental trying him out? If the last, was it to make him prove he was worth taking aboard or was he merely an experimental animal?

Fubb. Was this the colonel's real revenge, his way of getting back at his wife's lover? Or did this have nothing to do with Fubb as Fubb but with Fubb as participant in TOTE? Was this the Pentagon's way of getting rid of Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster because he had learned of TOTE's existence — whatever the hell TOTE was?

Or had he run into something else without knowing it?

The hydrofoil left a thrumming silence in its wake, like the beat of blood in his fingers. And now the silence filled, as all that the hydrofoil had frightened into hiding and mock death gave slithering and brushing sounds of life. He looked around quickly and armed himself with a forked stick to pin down any snake he might happen upon, both for defense of his own skin and for meat.

It must be around noon, but the dark leaves strained the sun into a shadow of itself, though here and there there was a dazzle on the water. The

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tannic-darkened depths hid whatever cottonmouth moccasins swam in them, but he imagined he could see the snaky rippling of black water write their presence.

His chin pebbled.

He was without a paddle. He was even without a boat.

6. TPA Travel by privately owned conveyance is authorized

He would have to get off this islet, not only to get out of the swamp but merely to live in the swamp. The islet offered little to live on long. But which bank should he make for? It would be well to keep to the higher side, because that would be the drier, and because small game — otters and such — took to higher ground when alligators roused from their winter sleep.

Forked stick ready, and picking his way, he traversed the islet. Where the ground was not squishy it was prickly. He broke slowly through to the edge and looked across. No: lower and wetter look to the earth and the vegetation. Back to the other side of the islet. He sighed and turned.

He hated to look ahead to swimming the stream. He gazed at his bandaged fingers. They hurt now and they were in for a lot more pain. He gathered likely fallen limbs as he made his way back to his starting point and had a heavy armful by the time he reached it. He laid them down in the form of a narrow raft.

He set his teeth, then used them to get a peeling start on the adhesive tape. He stopped, listening to the bellow of an alligator. Farther than it sounded, he told himself. He got the strips of tape off and wrapped one around either wrist. Safest place to save them: you never knew. His teeth came into play again to help unknot the gauze, and he unwound the bandages. His fingertips looked raw under the film of salve.

Luckily, Flugel had been generous with the gauze. Buckmaster lined up the knobs and roughnesses of the limbs forming his raft as best he could at either end to keep the gauze from shifting when he tied a strip around it, and he put a crosspiece under each end at that point to keep the raft relatively stiff, and he twisted each strip for strength before tying it as tight as he could. The raft was a foot shorter than himself and a foot and a half wide.

His forked stick was too short; he found a straight one long enough to pole with, stuck the forked stick under a binding for later, and slid the raft into the water. Gingerly he stretched out on it. It held, and it held him.

Dovetailing his fingers around the pole to save his fingertips, he thrust it in and shoved off. The raft gave itself slowly to the slow current. He poled now and then to move it nearer the other bank while looking for a likely place to land. It went well. Maybe the ramshackle raft would carry him all the way out of the swamp.

A line of bubbles lay across his way. He thought it signaled something alive till the smell hit him. Gases of decomposition. The smell of decaying and fermenting vegetation rose up all around and stirred old brain memories. He grinned. Spring. Beautiful spring.

The water exploded under him,

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heaving the raft, capsizing it, tearing it apart, and leaving him thrashing to stay afloat and fight off something monstrous in the water.

He grew aware that he was giving the thing life. He left off thrashing and it rocked easily. Mud. A mass of stinking bottom mud. A marsh-gas blowup. A bit of the bottom had torn loose out of sheer buoyancy — the joy of spring — and shot to the surface.

Time to laugh or swear or both later. He made for the bank. It looked steep, unnegotiable. He reached for an overhanging branch. He caught hold but it slipped away from bloodslick fingers. He turned from the bank to let himself drift down toward something offering purchase.

He had passed the islet and could see across to the opposite bank. An eight-foot alligator was slithering down.

Somehow, before the alligator nosed into the water, Buckmaster found he had caught hold of another overhanging branch and pulled himself up. And now the blood was glue and he had to tear himself loose.

He armed himself again with a stick, making sure first that it was not a snake, and looked back down at the water. The alligator moved by, like a run in dark silk. Be grateful to the alligator. Hundreds of years ago the Seminoles made water trails through the Okefenokee Swamp; the alligator has helped keep them open. Grateful, yes; but he would take his time leaving his semiknoll and following. Let it vanish around the bend of the channel.

Meanwhile his belly gnawed itself. It had gone a long time on coffee and. He found a wild onion. That stopped the immediate pangs. Now thirst. He eyed the dark waters. The leachings that stained the stream brown supposedly sterilized it as well. He made his way down to the edge, rinsed his hands, and drank out of their cupping. The water tasted bad enough to be good. The lap of the dogs. He would have been one of Gideon's men.

He caught up his stick, straightened, stiff already, and made his way downstream. He followed the channel, climbing over cypress knees, keeping to the soft mud banks. He came upon a spot of sand with no pebbles on top. He stopped. He tossed a small stone on it. It sank. Quicksand.

The first of many such spots. He bridged quagmire and quicksand by gathering fallen limbs or tearing and twisting off leafy brush or even pulling up grass and laying a carpet of this vegetation to walk or crawl on. Go slowly, but keep moving.

Once, one of his bridges gave and a bog seized him. He had to remember that mud, muck, and sand are more buoyant than water. It was panicking that did you in. If you struggled or lifted your feet while you were upright, you made a vacuum that sucked you down. He felt himself sink and threw himself forward, spreading his arms, and started to swim, to pull himself ahead, but always keeping his body horizontal. That one was good for bad dreams that night.

Every morning at first light he climbed a tree to take his bearings and make sure he wasn't merely looping. He kept moving throughout the daylight

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hours. He watched out for snakes and gators and bears. He slapped mud on insect bites. He tired of wild onion, berries, and dandelion greens, and even the painfully got olivelike fruit within the spiny-toothed leafstalks of saw palmetto.

He had found a triangular stone with sharp edges. It might have been Seminole. It looked worked. He wedged it into a split he made in one end of his stick and bound it in place with the tape he had kept on his wrists. If the manufacturer wanted him to plug the tape's waterproofing, he would. Now he had a spear.

It came into play when he stumbled on a black-shelled turtle sunning itself. He flipped the turtle over with the butt of his spear before it could move. He stabbed it in the throat and sawed its head off with the spearpoint. He tilted the turtle to bleed well while he looked to see if he could build a fire.

A fire plow was the only method he thought he could cope with. He cast about for a fallen cypress trunk or limb, and near at hand he hit one ready-made for him. A crack in the trunk formed a natural groove about eight inches long and just wide enough for a fire stick. He found a stick of cypress to fit. He did not know if he could get a fire going, but he collected a pile of tinder — dry shredded grass from an old nest of a mouse or a bird — and set it handy. He broke off dry wood and made another sizable pile. He held the fire stick in both hands and, favoring his fingertips, bore down hard as he moved it back and forth in the groove. Wood powder heaped up at one end of the groove, and as he moved the stick back and forth more rapidly and bore down more heavily, he felt heat and a spark formed in the powder. Quickly he fed pinches of tinder to the spark and fanned it into flame.

When he had a good fire going, he dragged the turtle to it and put the turtle atop it. He let the heat crack and split the undershell, and when it had done so he pulled the turtle off. When it had cooled enough he levered and wrenched the belly plate away. He used his spearpoint to butcher the turtle. He cleaned the carcass, laying on palmetto leaves the raw chunks he would cook and burying the rest to keep from drawing insects and much larger foes. He scooped water into the intact upper shell and put it on the fire and boiled the meat in the shell.

That was his one hot meal. He felt that it would be, and he stuffed himself. But he still had a good portion of stewed meat to carry along in a palmetto leaf. He settled himself for the night, satiated into foolish happiness. High in the west, great shoals of mother-of-pearl clouds, iridescent as fish scales, grew suddenly dark.

7. clnc clearance

He belonged to the Turtle Totem. He had eaten Turtle but he was thankful to Turtle and so he was at one with Turtle. Driftwood shapes ghosted along in the stream of night, but they would not come alive and eat him because Turtle guarded him from harm. Turtle's shell became the dome of heaven. Turtle's claws were the power that moved the universe. Turtle's tail was

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the rudder. And Turtle's head?

He gazed at the face but the face told him nothing. A mask would have told him more because a mask is open deception. Had Turtle truly initiated him into manhood? Was it good to kill or evil?

"My, we're getting philosophical," his father said, smiling with Turtle's smile and gazing into the campfire with the campfire's eyes. "I'll go into it if you want, but I think it's over your head." His father's voice changed into voices Stonewall had heard along the way. "The tipoff — the circumcisional evidence — is that, after the quake, the mountain showed stretch marks; at its foot the mouse. That is, if we're all of Creation there is, why all the fuss? But before we worry about the nature of reality, we have to worry about the reality of nature. In accordions with the principle of uncertainty, the finer you tune time the fuzzier space gets. We're on the horns of paradoxen. Maya, illusion, a funhouse rire-view mirror. Gravity is laughing matter and light is bilaterally symmetrical. It's all pretense — from before the Word 'Be.'"

It was true. We were all goners from the Word "Be." But it was there, blowing in the mind, expanding his consciousness. His own voice telling him he knew The Answer.

"The universe is expanding at the subatomic level as well as at the galactic level. Which means gravitation is not pull but push. Gravitation is expansion of everything, stretching even the void. Things do not fall toward each other, they *grow* toward each other. But, with all matter expanding at the same rate, this growth is invisible to observers who are also expanding."

It explained everything and he forgot it when he awakened.

8. PTGT Primary Target

Now and then he heard the hum of a swampboat or the buzz of a kicker, but it was always far off. Flugel and Messmore knew their boondocks. But he was coming to something. At least the way ahead changed. The channel widened and merged with other channels into a lake. It had the look of impounded waters. He had reached the middle of nowhere.

Then he made out across the lake a shack among the trees. He began to think how he would look to people. Like a figure out of the Stone Age? He smiled. But he was not with his own yet.

Too far to swim, the way he felt. He would have to follow the shore around.

One foot after the other for a long time seemed only to take him farther from the shack. But one foot after the other would get him there; he kept telling himself that.

He stopped. What first through a film of sweat looked to be a large turtle in the way proved to be a rowboat half in the mud. He dug it out. After finding it basically sound he caulked seams with grass and righted it and it floated. He hunted for a short broad stick to paddle with where he could not pole, gave up, and tore out the thwart; he would be kneeling to paddle anyway. He shoved off.

He had just left off poling and taken up his paddle when a plane came out of the sun. He waved at it, and splashed

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water to throw glints of light at the plane, but had no real hope it would see him. It did. It wagged back at him and his heart swelled and his eyes filled with its USAF insignia.

It swooped low, lower, and the water puckered ahead of the boat with the stutter and stitching of machine-gun fire. He sat back on his heels, unable to do anything but stare as the plane lifted itself for another pass.

In a brief fade of engine he heard "Bobwhite! Bobwhite! Bobwhite!" float across the lake toward him, but he saw no quail rise. The shooting had wakened no other sign of life. No one had appeared near the shack. Maybe it was abandoned, another dead end. But it was the only goal he had at the moment.

Someone was crazy. Either the pilot or himself. If it was not just some damn flyboy after kicks, then it had to be the Army, the Air Force, the whole world, all out to get Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster. That way lay paranoia.

His chin pebbled. He leaned forward and paddled again toward the shack. Left, right, left, right.

This time the stitching came nearer.

He turned his head to follow the plane as it swung around: very carefully he burned its markings into his brain. Couldn't the fool see his play target was mother-naked, in need of help? Or — Buckmaster looked down at himself — did the daubs of mud over bites seem a camouflage suit? At least the clown wasn't trying to hit him, or the stitches would have been in Buckmaster's side.

Was he trying to warn Buckmaster away? Away from what?

The plane was coming around again.

Buckmaster backpaddled, making back for shore, as the plane made its third pass. No bullets this time.

Maybe the pilot thought he had made his point at last, or maybe the plane was low on fuel. But the tail spouted a satisfied bright orange as the plane swung away, and it did not come around for another pass.

Buckmaster felt number than zero. Then the flesh reasserted itself, and he stood up in the rocking boat and shook his fist at the quicksilver speck slipping out of sight. Then he sat down heavily as a leg gave. And he saw that a ricocheting bullet had struck off a splinter of boat that had torn a flap of thigh.

Now he had another use for the tape. He unwound it from his spear to hold the flap of flesh in place.

He felt suddenly weary, and the plane might come back after all. He would put back in and wait for night and row across in the dark.

That was the worst day because it had begun the best day. And the night reflected that.

9. VO Verbal orders

The chaplain was a cross between Gen. Hackstaff and Joe the bartender at the O-club. Buckmaster told the chaplain: "I have a limpid conscience, Padre." But the chaplain insisted on praying for his soul. "I'll save your soul if I have to kill your spirit." And the chaplain presided at a drumhead court-martial, and while Sgt. Messmore drummed Buckmaster out with paradiddles and rimshots, Cpl. Flugel strip-

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ped Buckmaster right out of his uniform and left him wearing just the buttons.

Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster shook his head at the offer of a blindfold, but took the coffin nail in defiance of the surgeon general's report; and Col. Maximilian Fubb, admiring Buckmaster's bravery in spite of himself, barked, "You may fire when ready, Frying Pan."

Buckmaster braced himself against the post and in spite of himself closed his eyes. But the shots whistled past, striking stone not flesh. He opened his eyes.

Lt. Victor Landtroop was waving Maggie Fubb's pink panties to signal that the shots had wholly missed. But why then was ex-Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster bleeding? If you shoot a shadow, does the shadow bleed darkness? Or light?

Hay, paradiddle; straw,
paradiddle,
The cat and the catgut,
The moo jumped over the
moon...

It was not an opera tune time for the Triumphal March from *Aïda*, but neither was a Mother Goose rhyme fitting. His dream edited itself, and "Way Down upon the Swanee River" ran through his mind like a dark stream. This fostered a swansung sorrow that segued into taps ... the tap dance that opened Preston Sturges's *Hail the Conquering Hero* ... and just as six marines toted Woodrow LaFayette Pershing Truesmith home, Lt. Stonewall Jackson Buckmaster let go, let stop.

10. RIF Reduction in force

He had slept past the time he had planned to start, but it was still before dawn. He shoved off again, toward the shore he could not see. It showed itself more and more, and light filled the sky when he at last beached a hundred yards north of the shack and dragged the boat into the tree line.

Just in time. A jet screamed into being. The same plane. It passed over and disappeared. He waited, then limped on.

He moved through pine and palmetto toward the shack. He was the more startled of the two when he flushed a bobwhite quail. Its warning cry wakened a tremendous chorus of echoes somewhere behind the shack.

Shack was the wrong word for it. It was a sturdy building for its size, of weathered redwood, and a strong padlock fastened the door. He grimaced. But a power line and a gravel road led away from it through the trees, tying this place to the outside world. He was back in civilization, or at least on the right track.

He looked down at himself, then listened to make sure there were no womenfolk about before he stepped out into the open.

"Hello!"

His croak made him realize he had been wordless for quite a spell. But it was loud enough to bring a heavy fluttering out back, though no rise of birds. He rounded the shack and came up against chickenwire penning hundreds of bobwhite quail — round plump bodies, brown and black bars like service stripes, males with a slight crest

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and a white bib, females with a browner cast.

Buckmaster stared hungrily, then remembered he was back in civilization. The ruts of truck tires in the gravel said where the breeder had gone. Whoever the breeder was he would not leave his quail here alone long. He would be back sooner than later. Buckmaster leaned against the shack and slid down to sit and wait.

He had hardly closed his eyes when the jet opened them. It was on another sweep of the forbidden lake. He made himself one with the shadow of the shack. He felt sure it had passed by without spotting him, but it made up his mind for him that he could not wait.

He peered through a window in the side of the shack and made out cans and packages on shelves and clothing hanging from a hook. He broke the pane, sending the quail whirring and aborting again. He pulled out the jags of glass, heaved himself halfway through, then let himself fall the rest of the way, trying to land in a handstand to spare his game leg. It wasn't too bad.

The canned peaches and the crackers fitted his insides, the faded fatigues fitted his outsides less well. He had washed himself first. The shack held a sink with running water, a pump filtering and purifying the water, and there was soap. He used lots of water and lots of soap. His fingertips were a sight but had not festered. He used a clean dishcloth to bandage his thigh.

He could have used a shave, but the rusty, hairy blade in the razor put him off. There were no spares: seemed that must have been one of the things the man had gone into town for. Buckmaster felt his beard and looked at it in the mirror. Not bad for seven days' growth. Gave him a whole new look, and he might need a whole new look while he went about finding out what he had got himself into.

He had switched on the table radio and listened while he washed and ate and dressed. But there was no news — nothing about a missing Lt. Buckmaster, nothing about TOTE, nothing new in the world but flare-ups of the old woes, nothing worth noting other than the news to him that he had been a week in the swamp. He had lost track. He pocketed a box of crackers.

A cot stood against the wall. He eyed it, then shook his head and set it up only to help him climb back out through the window. He landed heavily, badly.

"'Bobwhite!' yourself."

That only made the quail bobwhite themselves all the more.

Keeping to the dirt shoulder of the gravel road, he set himself a stiff-legged pace. Why couldn't there have been shoes? He never knew why he missed hearing the pickup. It wasn't rattly but it wasn't all that silent, but when he rounded a bend he came face to face with it. Maybe the crunch of the crackers he was munching had covered it; most of the crackers in the box had broken in his exit and themselves made a good rattle.

The driver braked swiftly but smoothly and took in Buckmaster, the box of crackers, the clothes, the bare feet. He had a pouchy face, well-suited to hold a chaw of plug tobacco. His eyes

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snapped to attention as he recognized the faded fatigues.

"Howdy. You in trouble, mister?"

"I got lost in the swamp."

"That so? You're lucky, then. Seldom happens anyone gets lost comes out."

"Yes, I'm lucky." Buckmaster plucked at the loose fatigues. "I had to help myself to somebody's things. If they're yours I'll pay you back when —"

The man waved that away.

"Forget it. My name's Quintus Collum. What's yours?"

"Jackson."

"First or last?"

"Both. Jackson Jackson."

"Interesting name."

"They kid me about it a lot."

"I guess they would. You're not from these parts."

"Just visiting. Well, it's been nice meeting a friendly human after a week in the swamp. And thanks."

"Wait up, Jackson. A week, you say? No wonder you look dog tired. You can't be in any shape to walk out. You know how far it is to town?"

"I don't even know what town."

"Fargo. Just came from there." He nodded toward the back of the pickup. Buckmaster saw it held cartons of goods. "Shopping. Expecting company. Have to go back in tomorrow anyway to fetch more. So hop in and come on to the cabin. You can stay overnight. Don't doubt you could do with a good night's rest."

"Thanks all the same, Mr. Collum, but I'm behind time as it is."

"Then leastways come on down and get the extra pair of shoes I can lend you."

There had been no extra pair of shoes in the shack.

"No, thanks."

Collum leaned over and opened the left-hand door.

"Get in. That's not an invite, it's an order." He held a shotgun across his lap. It had hung from clips on the riser of the seat behind his legs; now it pointed at Buckmaster. "Sorry, Jackson Jackson, but I reckon I ought to hold both of you till my company's come and gone. You've seen too much."

"All I've seen is a lot of swamp. And a lot of quail."

"That's what I mean. You just might be one of them meddlesome northeastern reporters looking to smear the military."

"I just might be. And then again I just might be from the Inspector General or from the CID." Or from the Campfire Girls.

Collum's jaw went slack and drooled brown juice.

"CID?" The direct gaze of the shotgun wavered.

Buckmaster sighed and shook his head.

"All right, Collum, I'll be glad to get in and get this over with now that I've blown my cover." He pushed the barrel aside and climbed in and closed the door. "I left my ID in my clothes and my clothes in the fork of a tree near your cabin." He chuckled ruefully. "Got a soaking when I chuted in last night and landed in the lake."

Collum chewed on that nervously.

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"You're here on account of the quail?"

"What do you think?"

"Honest, Jackson, I only been following orders."

"That's what Eichmann said."

"Who?"

"Let's go, Collum. You can fill me in on the way."

"A few years back, 135,000 hunters bagged 4 million quail. That was the peak.

"Since then, there's always more hunters and always less quail. It ain't just the shooting. When timber people plant pine, the quail leave soon as the seedlings take hold. Then there's the pasturing of dairy and beef cattle. All in all, this here's getting to be no more quail country. And if there's one thing Air Force generals like it's shooting quail."

So that was what the protective reaction strike was all about. The brass wanted to keep everyone else out, and the pilot had thought Buckmaster was setting out fishing lines or otherwise poaching on their illegal preserves.

The pickup pulled up at the end of gravel. The birds whirred in their big cage. Collum's gaze followed Buckmaster's and grew proud.

"Pretty, hey? Mixed some wild ones in with the tame. When the generals come we set convoys out in the woods." The airs and graces of cheap perfume and cheap liquor clung to him; he had done some more immediately satisfying shopping in town. And now the smell of fear. "But what's going to happen now?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you. After all, you only followed orders."

"That's right." He climbed lightly out of the cab, and his eyes got bolder as he looked in at Buckmaster. "Say, Jackson, what's your rank?"

"First lieutenant."

Collum smiled.

"A dozen generals come here regular. I guess a dozen generals pull a lot of rank."

"I guess they do."

"You bet they do."

While Collum whistled a bobwhitish tune and dug the key to the padlock out of his pocket and opened the cabin door, Buckmaster unclipped the shotgun again from the seat riser. He broke it open. Collum whirled at the sound.

"Hey!"

"Nice piece. What are these in here, No. 7½ or No. 8?"

"No. 8. Now, look here—"

Buckmaster managed to get out and hold Collum frozen at the same time.

"I want you to walk ahead of me and when you come to the wire start knocking it down."

"But the birds will all fly away."

"That's the general idea."

"They'll chew my ass out."

"Pyorrhea meets diarrhea. Go on, it's an order."

Collum moved sullenly to the fence and wrenched feebly at the posts.

"I can't."

Buckmaster shot a nice wide pattern into the side of the shack.

"You can."

While birds still fluttered in the first flush of freedom, Buckmaster marched Collum back around into the shack and

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had him lie face-down on the cot. One hand held the shotgun ready, the other unwound fishline from a reel he had spotted on a shelf.

"Want to keep the chaw or spit it out? Could get messy later."

Collum turned his head and looked slowly up at Buckmaster. His eyes played possum in their pouches; then he suddenly spat a stream of juice at Buckmaster's eyes. Buckmaster pulled his face away enough to miss the worst of it but not too much to lose sight of the man. He shoved Collum back down with the shotgun. He lost all fight, and Buckmaster tied him to the cot.

After testing the knots, Buckmaster started out.

"Jackson, you ain't going to leave me like this? They won't be here for days."

"You'll keep." Buckmaster softened. "Once I get to town I'll leave word for the local law to look in on you. Best I can do for you and more than you deserve."

"I didn't do you no harm."

The jet flew past again. Buckmaster waited for its thunder to die down.

"Negative. Double negative. Nobody does me no harm."

Outside again, he blinked at more than the sudden sunlight. Fully half the quail had never left or had come back to their compound. His face hardened. They were dead anyway. Better at his hands than at the generals'.

He looked under the seat in the cab of the pickup and found boxes of shells: how many he did not bother to note, but they were surely more than enough to do the job.

When he had finished he went again into the shack. Collum lay quite still. Buckmaster washed spatters of blood from face and hands. He picked up a kitchen knife and moved toward the cot. Collum stiffened and swallowed his wad.

Buckmaster's fingers, more pointedly the trigger finger, felt too sore to put to untying and retying laces. He sliced the knots and pulled Collum's shoes off.

"I almost forgot you promised to lend me a pair."

Air filled all Collum's pouches.

"You ain't CID."

"No, I'm really with the Campfire Girls. We're taking over."

Before starting out in the pickup he looked to see what he had in the back. The booty included cases of bourbon. He had a drink on the brass. And another. He stopped. He was getting too light-headed. Among the cases and cartons he found a full laundry bag. He changed out of the fatigues into freshly laundered undershorts, white shirt, and blue jeans. Two pairs of socks, though his feet already felt as if they had swelled a size larger, helped make the shoes a good fit, bunion slits and all.

He turned the pickup around but drove away slowly. Collum and his pickup would be familiar sights in Fargo. Buckmaster wanted to pass through Fargo in the dark.

10. CIPAP Authority is granted to make such changes in above itinerary and to proceed to such additional places as may be necessary for the accomplishment of this mission

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After Fargo he pulled off the road into leafy concealment and dozed till dawn. He pulled back on, and 441 took him through Homerville and points north to Helena. West on 280 took him to Columbus. Nine miles short of Columbus he found the fuel gauge red-lining him. There were more filling stations than he could shake a dipstick at. Only he had no money for gas. He had bourbon. Would it work? He poured bourbon in the tank. After sputtering past Fort Benning and just before making Columbus, he noticed the driver of a canvased six-by-six truck coming the other way, evidently heading back from the Atlanta Army Supply Depot.

For a second their glances met. The driver, a Pfc., looked a lot like Sgt. Miles Messmore. The second passed. Buckmaster shook his head. Couldn't be. In the mirror he caught the other driver shaking his head. Couldn't be?

Buckmaster's gut tightened. By the time he found a place to swing around it would be too late to catch up with the truck and tail it home. At least he knew it was a Fort Benning motor pool truck. And whether or not that had been Messmore, it had been in his mind that the place to start hunting down the Tenth Experimental Company was Fort Benning.

Messmore and Flugel would have to pay for what they had put him through. He felt the shotgun against his calves. But the reckoning was not at hand. That would come when he learned the score. Meanwhile he would go on toting it up.

He parked the pickup in a black neighborhood, where the stuff in the back would do the most good. He started to wipe the steering wheel, then laughed shortly. He didn't have to worry about leaving fingerprints. He didn't worry long about leaving the shotgun behind; he needed brains more than firepower. He got out and eyed the remaining firewater in the back. It would make fine trade goods. He fixed himself up a package of six bottles of bourbon and a loaf of bread: that left him only a book of verses and a thou shy of paradise. He walked away from the pickup through a gauntlet of eyes.

Collum. The man must be feeling uncomfortable about now. Too bad there was no money in Collum's borrowed pockets for a phone call. It took Buckmaster a good walk to locate an emergency call box that looked safe to use, one not in the line of sight of women leaning on windowsills and one void of loiterers.

He told the policeman's voice and the tape to notify Fargo law that Quintus Collum needed help real bad. He hung up on "Who's calling?" If he had given in to the temptation and said "General Jackson," the cop would have dismissed the call as a hoax.

Now Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster needed help real bad. He needed a phone, a typewriter, and brains to pick.

He knew what he was looking for after he saw it. Its name was FTA. Op art lettering on the window euphemistically expanded this into Free Time Association.

Out of uniform but not out of habit, his flexors readied themselves to return highballs. But the pair of GIs he en-

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countered walked by him unseeing into a storefront. He stopped and let rock and roll wash over him while he studied the posters and tearsheets. It was an enlisted men's coffeehouse, but the joint doubled as the office of an offbase underground paper. Here would be a phone, a typewriter, and brains to pick.

He shifted his parcel to his other arm and went in. Most of the GIs in here wore civies. No one would look at him twice.

They eyed him twice. The dogface cynosure was his week's beard. He couldn't plead shaving bumps. He could plead a binge that had left him AWOL. He thought drunk, which meant he thought firmly sober, and looked around with bleary concentration. The place was fairly full, but he spotted an empty table in a corner, steered a course for it, set his parcel at his feet, and sat down to send his gaze reconnoitering happily.

The decor was cork-float fishing nets on the walls and candles in dead soldiers on the tables. Posters of Mao and Mickey Mouse and Che hung on the nets, and there was bare space for graffiti such as "Round up all the squares" and "Ft. Benning is American as appuru pai." The sound was so thick that he had to squint through it, but the regulars seemed to find the endless riff a reassuring monotony, a certainty in an uncertain world. He quickly picked out the one who ran the joint.

The masthead of the sheet on the store window had listed a Joe Dee as editor and publisher, and Buckmaster saw the name Joe on the lips of those speaking to the twenty-year-old leaning his back against the food counter. Even without that, Buckmaster would have picked him out as the leading figure.

Joe Dee wore a sweatshirt bearing the motto: BE HEALTHY — EAT YOUR HONEY. Though in civies, Dee would be in the Army and would be a Pfc. at most; the Army might say a good soldier is a bitching soldier, but the Army brass would not like anything about FTA; Dee would remain a Pfc. till his hitch was up. He looked to be twenty. A sharp kid.

Buckmaster let Dee wonder about him for a moment, then took out a bottle of bourbon, held it up to the light, and set it on the table. Joe Dee hurried over.

"You trying to get us busted? We don't have a liquor license, so no setups in here."

"Sorry, Joe, but you got me wrong. I'm not drinking, I'm trading. I'm stone broke —"

"Man does not live by stone alone."

Dee spoke absently, clearly trying to figure out if Buckmaster was a provocateur. Just as clearly he was taking no chances. He shot a couple of glances, and a pair of brawny GIs moved to watch the entrance.

Buckmaster put up a hand in Scout's oath.

"Honest. I'm out of bread and I wondered if six bottles of bourbon will buy me a few things."

"Such as?"

"A few phone calls, the use of a typewriter."

Dee frowned, then smiled.

"We're not in the swapping business, but we do try to help our fellow

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soldiers out. That's what FTA is all about. You *are* in the Army? Mind showing me your ID?"

"That's the whole trouble. That's what I have to straighten out. I woke up in a hotel room in Atlanta this morning, sobering up after a long drunk, and it hit me I'm a week AWOL. And on top of that my wallet with my bread and my papers ran away with the girl. I sneaked out of the hotel and hitched a ride back here. But I don't want to show up at Benning like this."

"What outfit you in?"

"Tenth Experimental Company." He watched Dee's face closely but drew a blank. "Want the name, rank, and serial number?" He gave his name as Cpl. Jackson Wallstone and rattled off his own number without the 0 in front of it.

Dee picked up the rest of the package and examined it.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Found it under the bed. All's left of the case I started out with."

Dee smiled.

"And the loaf of bread?"

Buckmaster tried to look earnestly puzzled.

"I don't remember that. I guess I thought I might get a little bit hungry."

Dee laughed.

"How about now? Are you hungry, Jackson?"

Buckmaster thought.

"I guess I am."

Dee nodded, elbowed room for himself at the counter, and brought back a chili dog and a double Coke. He looked apologetic.

"I'll throw this in. It goes for a buck but it isn't worth a buck. But then a buck isn't worth a buck."

From another table Dee liberated a camp catsup bottle in the form of a wounded soldier; the catsup poured from a bandaged head. Then Dee hustled the bourbon out of sight into the back room.

The two GIs on guard opened themselves for a girl. She came in with a handful of FTAs that looked as if they smelled of fresh ink and with a headful of smiles and nods. She missed seeing Buckmaster behind his chili dog. She made for the back room, remained there a long moment, and when she came out she made for Buckmaster's table and sat down across from him.

"Hi. I'm Sally Kaster."

He grinned on a bite of chili dog. Sally Kaster was a shag haircut, a Day-glo flower on the left cheek, pale lips, granny glasses; shoulder bag, peekaboo dress, brass-toed boots. She was very thin and very tall, and each made her look more of the other.

"I help Joe put out the FTA. Joe told me to take care of you."

The chili dog took another grin, and she hurried on.

"I mean, you know, show you where the phone is, you know, and the typewriter."

Buckmaster chewed quickly. She touched his arm.

"No, please take your time. You eat, I'll just sit here."

No doubt Dee had told her, "See what you can worm out of him." See if Jackson Wallstone's story stood up, stood repeating.

"What are you?"

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"Mmm?"

She frowned. "I mean, you know, what's your, you know, sign?"

He thought. "Cancer, I guess."

She made a face. "You mean you're a Moonchild. We don't say Cancer."

"Isn't that dishonest?"

"Just, you know, nicer. I'm an Aquarian."

"Does that make you lucky?"

"I know my luck. If I, you know, knocked on wood, I'd, you know, get splinters. You know?"

"I know." He knew. Her words got in the way of what she said, and what she said got in the way of what she meant.

"What's your unit?"

He told her.

"What're you experimenting on?"

"Sorry, that's top secret."

"Oh?"

"No, honest. Being AWOL's nothing to what I'd be in for if I shot off my mouth about our work."

"Is it dangerous work?"

"I'm beginning to think so."

"You know, I don't think you like what you're doing, or, you know, you wouldn't've got all that, you know, drunk and be, you know, AWOL."

"Maybe I was celebrating and overdid it."

Her eyes searched his face. "I don't think so. You don't, you know, look like that kind of, you know. What made you sign up in the first place?"

He shrugged. "Three hots and a cot."

"Are you really, you know, straight arrow? Do you really want to turn yourself in? Or do you want out? We can help you get a, you know, medical discharge. For instance, you know, there's licorice, you know?"

He knew. Draft dodgers had fooled doctors by eating lots of licorice before their physicals. The glycyrrhizinic acid in licorice makes the body retain sodium and mimic oversecretion of aldosterone.

"Or if you don't want to try that, you know, we can keep you underground here, you know, or get you to, you know, Canada or Sweden?"

"If you don't mind, I'll just, you know, face the music."

"You sure you're a Moonchild?"

Dee appeared behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. He smiled at Buckmaster and nodded toward the back room.

"Anytime you're ready. And you look ready."

Buckmaster got up, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin.

"That was good. Thanks."

"Sally will show you."

Sally showed him.

"There's the phone. And here's the, you know, area phone book. The typewriter's over there. Need any help?"

"No, thanks."

She hesitated, smiled, then left.

Even with the door shut the rock and roll came through strong. He looked around. The bourbon was nowhere in sight. He opened the phone book and found the Fort Benning number and dialed it. He covered his free ear with the heel of his palm.

"Put me through to the Tenth Experimental Company."

The Benning operator's voice took

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an odd turn. "One moment, sir. I'll have to connect you with Lt. Fiordaliso."

Lt. Fiordaliso had a musical voice, and Buckmaster was not using the rock and roll as a touchstone. She let him repeat his request and herself repeated the name sweetly.

"The Tenth Experimental Company?"

"That's right. I want to speak to the C.O., Capt. Romeo Clapsaddle."

Lt. Fiordaliso's voice became gothic architecture. "I realize that this is April First and that that's like a full moon to some people. But I find it a not very funny joke, and one that's fast getting tiresome. Why don't you stick to phoning the zoo and asking for Mr. Lyon?"

"Hold on." Buckmaster was trying to hold on to something himself. He spoke all the more forcefully. "This is no joke, Lieutenant. The Tenth Experimental exists. You may not know about it because it's a top-secret installation. But it's there and it's urgent that I reach its C.O." Had he shaken her? There was a pause he hurried to fill. "Look, you can check with the Pentagon. Ask for Col. Maximilian Fubb."

Another pause. Then, "All right. I will. Will you hang on, or will you call back?"

"I'll hang on."

Copies of the latest issue of FTA lay on the desk. Sally must have brought them fresh from the printer. It took Buckmaster a while to catch on to the usages "hash" for "he/she," "herm" for "him/her," and "sheir" — no doubt pronounced "share" — for "his/her(s)." Sally Kaster's influence? Anyway, the item his eye fell on seemed to indicate an enlisted personnel's union was in the pangs of organizing. "FTA board members are pushing overtime pay for a soldier when hash puts in more than thirty hours performing their duties — *whether or not the extra time is punishment for herm.*"

"Hello?"

"Right here, Lieutenant. How did you make out?"

"I have some information about that matter, but I can't give it to you over the phone. You will have to come to the base and see me in my office. Can you do that?"

"Yes. Thanks. I'll be there."

Sally Kaster came back into the room just then, and the music fortissimo'd between doorshuts. When Lt. Fiordaliso's voice came back in focus, it was saying, "— your name so I'll know who to —"

He hung up.

Kaster eyed him anxiously.

"How did it go? Still plan to turn yourself in?"

"That's the strategy. Now for the tactics. The typewriter, if you'll let me at it."

He warmed his hands up and flexed his fingers, like a concert pianist, and sat down to it. He helped himself to a blank sheet of paper and began to tap out a pass for Cpl. Jackson Wallstone. Kaster laughed.

"I've seen slow, but you are s-l-o-w." Then she saw the tips of his fingers. "Sorry. Want me to —?"

"No, thanks."

"Happen in one of your, you know, experiments?"

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"Happened in line of duty."

Her face turned fierce. "I'll bet your experiments are imperiling this whole, you know, area. But all the brass cares about is, you know, secrecy. I hate that. I believe in the people's right to, you know, know."

"I'll tell herm when hash comes in."

Kaster's fierceness laughed away. Then she grew serious. "I see you've read our sheet. What do you think of it?"

"For what it is, it's good."

Her eyes went Jeanne d'Arc. "You don't like what it stands for?"

He didn't want to argue with her, but he didn't drop it because he felt he wasn't arguing with her but with himself.

"What it stands for is nice. But an army isn't nice. And what happens to an army when you fight it from within?"

"We fight, yes, but not to destroy it. We know there's a need for an army in today's world. We're not that, you know, naive. We fight to humanize the military."

"If you humanize it, then it won't be the military."

"They've brainwashed you."

She let him finish typing in peace. Joe Dee came in as Buckmaster was signing the name of Capt. Romeo Clapsaddle to the pass.

"All squared away, Jackson?"

"Almost, Joe." He rubbed his beard. "I can't go back looking like this."

"We can fix that."

Buckmaster nodded his gratitude. He glanced around, looking for something he could do to pay Dee back, and saw how to pay the Air Force brass back.

"If you want a story for your sheet, I can give you one about Air Force generals setting up and enforcing a private hunting preserve in the Okefenokee."

Dee smiled an easy smile. "I'd be more interested in hearing about the — what is it? — Tenth Experimental? What sort of thing are you working on?"

Dee was the type of EM Buckmaster had always put down as a smartass, as almost a traitor to tradition, as everything a good soldier was not. But now he felt a liking for Dee and Dee's anti-ness. He fought the temptation to tell Dee the whole truth as he knew it. He had to maintain a wariness and an anti-ness of his own.

"Like I told Sally, it's top secret."

Dee's easy smile didn't harden. "So top secret Benning has no record of it. You see, I used the phone before you did."

Kaster whirled on Buckmaster.

"You've been putting me on? Why?"

"If I had told you the truth, you wouldn't've believed me."

"How do you know? Try me."

"Lay off him, Sally. He has his reasons — or unreasons. We all have our paranoias."

"But he could be a, you know —"

Dee cut her off with a slice of the hand. "They've been trying to get me for a long while now. But I don't think he's a plant." He turned to Buckmaster. "I'm betting you're all right. But even if I'm all wrong, you don't worry

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me. I don't have any deep dark secrets. They ought to know by now I let it all hang out." He studied Buckmaster's face, then nodded slowly. "Besides, I believe you really are in trouble with the Army. That puts you on my side whether you know it or not, or want to be or not. Meanwhile, you need a shave and clothes that fit. We're about the same size. When we close for the night, Sally will take you home and fix you up."

Kaster walked out of the back room ahead of Buckmaster stiffly and did not sit with him again. Before leaving him to himself she did tell him home, a communal you know thing, was only a few blocks away. She made her way around the room, table by table, taking down what the men told her about conditions on the base and in the service generally.

In spite of the noise Buckmaster found himself dropping off, lost himself. He came alert. The live noise had cut off, leaving the field to the recorded noise. The street door had opened on darker night, and Buckmaster saw first the white helmet liners, the white gloves, the .45 automatics on the white gun belts, the MP brassards, the black boots with white laces. Then he saw the faces. Messmore and Flugel.

Both were MP sergeants now, and the eyes of both scanned the place and fixed on him.

Buckmaster looked around. The GIs seemed collectively sullen at the incursion but individually glad it was not on their account. They had no leadership. Joe Dee was out of sight, likely in the back room. Sally Kaster stood up but only stared as Messmore made for Buckmaster while Flugel remained in the doorway. If Messmore felt he was in enemy territory, he didn't look it. He smiled as Buckmaster rose slowly.

"All right, soldier." That was in grits and gravy. Then in a yam whisper, "Look, Lieutenant, why don't you come along quiet? That way nobody gets hurt. We got a lot to talk over once we're away from here."

Buckmaster gestured at the corner he was in, the fishnetted wall he was up against.

"Guess I don't have any choice."

Kaster moved herself toward Messmore's side.

"Listen, Sergeant, he's been planning to turn himself in, so—"

Messmore put out a big white-rayed hand.

"Stay out of this, sister."

But she had stayed in it just long enough. Buckmaster tore the fishnet from the wall, and in the same movement flung it over Messmore. The net fell over Kaster as well, and Messmore and Kaster struggled at cross-purposes, entangling themselves all the more. He gave them chairs to stumble over and slid past the bobbing corks of their writhings.

"Stop him!" Flugel had found his voice.

The GIs parted and closed, and Buckmaster reached the door of the back room.

Dee looked up from his typewriter as the door opened and closed, frowned at the brief relative hush and scuffle, and lifted an eyebrow.

"What's up?"

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"The MPs."

"After you?"

As if Dee didn't know. Dee sprang to his feet.

"There's a —"

Buckmaster decked him before he could finish, dragged him out of the way, shoved the desk against the door. The phone. But by the time the cops came, it would all be over. There had to be a way out, or at least a hiding place. There was no other door, not even a window. But Dee had hidden the bourbon away. Where? He looked down.

The desk legs had scuffed a rug away from the outline of a trapdoor. He lifted the door. Steps led down into darkness. Might be a way through to an adjoining building; might be a dead end.

He left the trapdoor open and stood against the wall on the hinge side of the door to the front room. He felt the building shake. He thought himself thin, willed his molecules into the wall.

Messmore nearly tore the door off its hinges. That would have left Buckmaster without concealment. But the hinges held, and the door shoved the desk out of the way and shielded Buckmaster. In a flash Messmore was in the room and in a crouch away from the open doorway. Flugel followed, knelt to Dee for a second, then loosened the .45 in its holster and moved toward the cellar opening. He took a deep breath and started down the stairs. Messmore followed.

When the second white blob vanished, Buckmaster stepped silently over. Eyes looked up at him as he slammed the trapdoor shut. He stood a pair of desk legs on the trapdoor. Pounding and swearing moved him away. Bullets might come next.

"Joe, are you all right? Joe?"

Kaster sat herself on the floor and rested Dee's head in her lap. Dee stirred, opened his eyes to the pain of light, rubbed soreness, and winced. He looked past Kaster at Buckmaster.

"What was that for?"

He got to his feet. Buckmaster all at once felt wobblier than Dee looked. Had he been wrong about Dee? He looked at Dee and knew he had been wrong.

"I'm sorry, Dee. I thought you had turned me in."

"Sure." But Dee's face and voice were cold. "Turned you in?" Then he took in the state of the room and heard the pounding and swearing below. "What happened?"

"Two guys in MP uniforms came in and tried to take me."

"Great. What do we do now?"

"Call the MPs."

"But *they're* —"

"Phony MPs."

Dee stared at him, then stared at the trapdoor. He listened, Kaster listened, Buckmaster listened. The pounding and swearing had stopped. Dee shook his head.

"Whoever they are, they're gone."

"So there is a way out?" Buckmaster grimaced. He could have saved himself a lot of sweat.

"Yes. Look, you'd better go too. Now. Fast."

11. NSI Nonstandard item

An ante-bellum mansion that had

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lost the war with time housed the FTA commune. Commune was the wrong word for it. It was more like a stop on today's underground railway. The wide streets had been empty of MPs real or phony, and the house itself seemed nearly empty of anyone. Sally Kaster, showing Buckmaster to a second-floor room, told him they had a big turnover of activists passing through. Buckmaster heard only one, a bedspring twang, as they moved by the one closed door.

Kaster also showed him the hall bathroom and brought him a razor with a fresh blade. She came back again while he was rinsing the razor. She stood behind him and studied the result in the mirror.

"Not bad." She hurried past herself. "Anything else you need? I put clean, you know, sheets on your bed."

"Thanks." He opened the medicine cabinet and found a bottle of aftershave lotion. "I'll just tend to my wounds before I sack out."

He gave his fingertips dashes of lotion.

"What happened to your fingers? Really."

"Same failing as the Venus de Milo's. I bite my fingernails and don't know when to stop."

She made a face at the mirror and sat down on the edge of the bathtub. She showed no sign of leaving when he made to see to his thigh. He took off Collum's pants and untied the dishcloth bandage and put a sting of lotion on the wound.

"What happened to your, you know, thigh?"

"I was in a boat in the Okefenokee Swamp, minding my own business, when a Phantom jet came along and strafed me."

She got up and turned her back on him.

"All right. I'll mind my own business. But I don't see why you can't trust me. I only want to help."

"I trust you."

"You make me so mad."

Her thinness added to her body's attitude of hurt. He put his hands on her shoulders and felt a tenseness that slowly tenderized. But he did not yet pull her to him. He remembered Dee's hands on her shoulders. He hadn't let Maggie's marriage to Col. Fubb hold him off, but this girl's possible relationship with Joe made him hold off.

"Are you and Joe, you know—?"

"Nothing serious." She turned in his arms and smiled. "Go on, lie to me. Tell me you think I'm pretty. Tell me you love me."

He left her sleeping, and before anyone else was stirring in the predawn, he shaved again and went through closets. Even the empty rooms had wardrobes, whether the leavings of passers-through or the belongings of base-bound members of the commune. In the room next to his he had spotted Kaster's shoulder bag on the dresser. He had picked it up but had put it down without opening it. He found a Pfc.'s jacket in that room and a pair of trousers. He put them on. A fairly good fit. Joe Dee's? He started toward the shoulder bag again, then stopped himself again with a grimace, and quitted that room to get on with his scrounging.

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He liberated a cap and a pair of shoes his size in another room, tore corporal's stripes off a jacket in another room, and wherever he came across loose change, he changed it from the other pockets to his own. He pinned corporal's stripes on over the Pfc's to go with Cpl. Jackson Wallstone's pass, working the safety pins from the inside of the sleeves to make the pinning less overt.

Meaning only to look in on Sally before he left, he came back to his room. She stopped breathing as the light from the hall hit her. Then she opened up. Her eyes studied him gravely, her mouth smiled uncertainly.

"So early?"

He nodded. She studied his uniform.

"Let me sew the stripes on."

"No time. I want to catch the first bus."

"Do you have money?"

He rattled the change. "Enough to get me to Benning." Unless they'd raised the fare since he had been here last; he might have to thumb a ride.

She must have caught his flicker of doubt because she slid out of bed and ran to get her bag and handed him a ten-dollar bill. She held on to one end.

"This is only a loan. You'll have to come back to repay me."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. Any other way I'd feel like a you know."

Her eyes searched his face.

"I'll see you again? Don't lie."

He put her to bed.

"Go back to sleep and dream it's coming true."

He kissed her eyes shut.

12. NFR No further requirement

Buckmaster got onto the post with a busload of soldiers beating reveille. The Infantryman Statue — the "Ultimate Weapon" — still stood in front of Infantry School Headquarters saying, "Follow me." Buckmaster wandered purposefully away from the others and followed his nose to the post chapel. It was open. Empty. He went in and sat down. A damned good place to kill time.

He raised his head out of a doze to find the approaching footsteps were the chaplain's. The chaplain was eyeing him almost with alarm — as a pope might eye someone holier than the pope.

"Don't let me disturb you, son. If there's one thing I don't want to do, it's come between a man and his God." His smile said that was a joke, son. He tried to find out Buckmaster's God. "You Catholic, son?"

"No, sir."

"Ah, well, we're all God's children, aren't we?"

"Yes, sir."

The feet and voices of God's children were beginning to resound on the post, but headquarters would not be fully operative yet awhile. Buckmaster put off resurrecting time. He let the chaplain detain him. He put on his garrison cap but did not go. The chaplain had captain's bars. Not much, but more than Buckmaster.

"Well then, son —"

"Excuse me. Could you get a message to the commanding general?"

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The chaplain's pinchbottle face drained dry. He laughed uneasily.

"Corporal, I have to go through channels just like everyone else. Maybe if you told me your problem I could help you, though my hours —"

"I see."

"No, wait, Corporal. I'm not the only chaplain here. What's your faith?"

Buckmaster started to say Anabaptist, then struck that flag of convenience and flew a Jolly Roger.

"I belong to the Church of Improbability."

"I'm afraid I don't —"

"It's a sect that started on Sigma Corvi III. It began with people praying to a god who had latched on to probability and who took credit for it. Nary a priest — or seminary a one — would dare to cross him. That worked fine for a millennium or so. Then they found out he probably didn't exist. And so they killed him."

The chaplain blinked. Then his pinchbottle face filled up.

"Corporal, don't you believe there's a God?"

"I believe God's a black box."

"A what?"

"You can't give me the wiring diagram, can you?"

"Isn't it enough to believe we're here for a purpose? Even though we may not know that purpose?"

Buckmaster let himself look astonished. "Why, the purpose is no mystery."

"All right then, Corporal, suppose you tell us. What are we here on earth for?"

The chaplain smiled, waiting. It seemed a smile of smugness till you looked deeper, and Buckmaster almost felt ashamed of himself; the man was an easy mark. But he had asked for it.

"What on earth are we here for? Here's the whole thing: we're shit machines."

The chaplain sat down and sat silent as Buckmaster left. He seemed to be straining at stool.

13. TOE Table of organization and equipment

Buckmaster made for headquarters mess hall and got in the chow line, though his purpose was not chow, which was just as well. He took his tray to a table and, picking his spot, sat down beside a clerical-looking Sp 4.

"Hi. I just transferred here today."

"And just made corporal."

"Yeah." He had picked the right man. The guy had a quick eye. "I'm going to be in the Personnel Service Division."

The Sp 4 stiffened slightly and eyed him as a possible competitor. "What section?"

"Personnel Records Branch."

The Sp 4 relaxed. "I'm in the Personnel Management Branch. Name's Harry Rushcamp."

"Jackson Wallstone."

"Jackson Wallstone? Say, that's a funny combination. You know, if you turn your last name around —"

"Yeah. My old man thought of that. That's why he named me Jackson."

"Oh." He smiled at a thought. "Personnel Records Branch. That's Lt. Fiordaliso."

"What's he like?"

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"She. A Wac. Juliet Fiordaliso." He told Buckmaster what she was like, and Buckmaster gathered she was a dish, though not everyone's, and everything about her was sharp, even her curves.

Rushcamp had never heard of a Sgt. Miles "Zulu" Messmore or a Cpl. Oscar Flugel. Rushcamp said he felt sure he would know if they were post personnel because he had a thing for names — "Oscar Flugel! Now there's a name." — and every roster passed before his eyes.

"Ever heard of the Tenth Experimental Company?"

"No. That the outfit you transferred from?"

"No. Just a name I heard."

Before Rushcamp began wondering why the name Jackson Wallstone hadn't caught his attention on the lists that passed before his eyes, Buckmaster thanked him and said he'd see him around and got up and left.

In spite of himself and the food, he had emptied the tray. A good little shit machine.

Buckmaster crossed the parade ground, past men and women standing in formation, and dispatched himself to Headquarters.

The sign was there. MAJOR GENERAL REEBER BATTLE, COMMANDING GENERAL, U.S. ARMY INFANTRY CENTER AND COMMANDANT, U.S. ARMY INFANTRY SCHOOL, FORT BENNING, GEORGIA. Was the general there?

He tuned in on two majors he was slow to overtake, his need to know working.

"The Old Man's out on the course."

"Obstacle course?"

"Golf course."

"Same thing, of course."

They looked around before laughing, saw him, refrained, officers forming a closed society.

Buckmaster followed them inside, and then the walls arrowed him to the Personnel Records Branch of the Personnel Service Division. He'd meant to try Fiordaliso first anyway. If she didn't pan out, well, the chain of command had fusible links.

As Sp 4 Rushcamp had led him to expect, Lt. Fiordaliso was a living flow chart, all business but all feminine. He got in to see her by saying he was the one who had phoned her about the Tenth Experimental Company.

"At ease, Corporal." She looked him over and frowned. At the uniform or the man? The inspection was unsettling and humbling. "You're the one who phoned? I thought it was an officer."

"That's what I wanted you to think, ma'am. Saved time."

"Watch it, Corporal. I may think something you won't like. What's your name?"

"Harry Rushcamp, ma'am."

"Do you know a Lt. Buckmaster?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's the guy, sorry, the officer, who told me about the Tenth Experimental Company."

"I see. Her frown deepened to help her see. "Where is he?"

"I can get in touch with him."

"Did he send you here?"

"In a way. Ever read the FTA sheet?"

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She gave a nod, more to herself than to him. "I've seen it. Are you with —?"

"FTA is thinking of running a story exposing the Tenth Experimental Company."

Fiordaliso seemed to fight down a start. "Exposing it?"

"Its potential destructiveness, effect on the environment, hazard to soldiers and the population at large, that kind of thing."

He had the feeling he had just lost the skirmish.

Fiordaliso seemed to fight back a smile. But her voice, when it came out, came out deadly serious. "Let me warn you, Cpl. Rushcamp. This is a top-secret matter. You might like to know that Col. Fubb was so interested in your call that he's flying someone right down." She glanced at the clock. "The officer should be here any minute now. He's expecting to meet a Lt. Buckmaster, not a Cpl. Rushcamp." She gestured toward her phone. "So you will get in touch with the lieutenant now. Then you will wait in the outer office." There was a glass partition; she would be dismissing him without losing sight of him.

Buckmaster nodded to the CRT display on her desk.

"Would you mind making a call first?"

"About what, Corporal?"

"There are two men on base Col. Fubb's men ought to meet as well. Will you find out what units a Sgt. Miles Messmore and a Cpl. Oscar Flugel are in and have them on hand without telling them why?"

She eyed him sharply, then repeated the names and tapped keys. Her eyes glowed with reflected readout. She cleared the screen before he could step around for a look at it.

"I have that information, Corporal. I'll see they're at the meeting."

Lying bitch. Sp 4 Rushcamp, if you believed him and Buckmaster believed him, hadn't made the names. So Fiordaliso had been pretending to summon up the data. She was on the other side, whoever or whatever the other side was.

If it hadn't been Joe Dee who had called in those phony MPs Messmore and Flugel, and Buckmaster felt sure it hadn't, and if it hadn't been pure coincidence, and Buckmaster felt sure it hadn't, then it had been Lt. Fiordaliso who had tipped them off. She had heard the blare of music in the background of his phone call. That either pinpointed the FTA coffeehouse or narrowed the search.

And if Fiordaliso had tipped them off once, she would tip them off again. There had been no call to Col. Fubb, and no Col. Fubb's man was flying down. There would be only another try at seizing or silencing Buckmaster.

"All right, Corporal. Now make that call to Lt. Buckmaster."

"Right away, ma'am. All I have to do is step outside the building and give him the high sign."

He saluted, about-faced, and strode out.

She hesitated too long. Her "Corporal —" was far enough away for him reasonably not to hear it.

14. SUPOHDU Supply from stock on hand or due in

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What remained of Sally Kaster's ten bought him a half-dozen golf balls at the PX.

He wandered among the vehicles at the parking lot looking for one with keys in the ignition.

"Wallstone."

Buckmaster recognized the voice sooner than the name. Pfc. Joe Dee sat at the wheel of a jeep.

"I wasn't sure at first without the beard. I see my spare jacket made corporal. Did you explain away your AWOL? At least you're not in the stockade."

"Yet. It isn't over. What are you doing here?"

"My sergeant ran out of his brand of smokes. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for a heap to clout."

"Wallstone, you are something else. And I'm beginning to think someone else." He spotted the golf balls. "Going to fill a few cavities?"

"Yeah, me and W.C. Fields. Maybe you know — where's General Battle's golf course?"

"Old Rivet Divot? Somewhere out on the Reservation. Thinking of bribing him with those? I think his honor comes a little bit higher."

"Just a gimmick to get to him."

"That I'd like to see. Let me drive you there."

"What about your sergeant?"

"So I'll tell him I had to wait for them to dig a case of his brand out of the back."

"Never volunteer." Buckmaster hopped in. "On the other hand, I never look a gift jeep in the gears. But wouldn't it go better for you if it seemed I forced you to take me? Or if I simply slugged you and drove off?"

Dee put up his dukes but only as if to fend off. "Overkill. I already have the bruise to prove you made me do it if it comes to that." He pulled out of the parking lot. "I've been wanting to get a look at the general's golf course and write it up. One more zinger about the brass wasting the taxpayer's dollar."

They drove under the shade of trees, crossed Upatoi Bridge, and reached Outpost No. 1.

"Golf balls for General Battle" got them past Outpost No. 1 onto Fort Benning Reservation and directions to just where in the 185,000 acres the golf course was.

Dee was first to spot the golf cart. Far enough away to be a white dot till you sharpened your eyes, it rolled along the green.

"There he goes with his aide. How'll you catch up with him? We can't take out after them in the jeep."

"I'll cut him off at the next tee: be easy enough. Drop me off here, Joe, and turn back. I don't want you to get mixed up in this any more than you are."

"I'm mixed up, all right. I sure would like to know what's going on. But, okay."

Buckmaster waved so-long and loped across the terrain leading his target. His thigh felt the pull of a muscle and slowed him so that he reached the tee late. The general was already setting up for his drive. Buckmaster held his salute, waiting for the general to acknowledge him. The general's mouth was a thin red line.

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"Gunning, I thought there were never to be any interruptions."

The lieutenant colonel with the general turned to Buckmaster.

"Corporal, what do you mean by interrupting the commanding general?"

Buckmaster held out the golf balls.

"Sir, compliments of Capt. Clapsaddle."

"Gunning, who in hell is Capt. Clapsaddle?"

"Corporal, who is Capt. Clapsaddle?"

"Sir, Capt. Romeo Clapsaddle is C.O. of the Tenth Experimental Company."

"Gunning, what the hell is the Tenth Experimental Company?"

"Corporal, what organization is the Tenth Experimental Company part of?"

"Why, sir, it's in the general's command."

"Gunning, I know what-all's in my command. I never heard of the Tenth Experimental Company." The thin red line slackened a bit. "Have you ever heard of it?"

"No, sir. Corporal, in what area is your unit?"

"It's not my unit, sir. All I know is a captain stopped me and handed me these golf balls and ordered me to take them to Gen. Battle and say they came with the compliments of Capt. Romeo Clapsaddle, C.O. of the Tenth Experimental Company."

"Are you sure that's what he said?"

"Yes, Colonel. He made me say it back to him till he was satisfied."

"Gunning, my nose tells me this is something in very bad taste or something much more sinister — and the latter is more likely right. You know how I hit a ball, and if I hit one having a dynamite core — the end of a deadly foe of all leftists. Gunning, call in and get an EOD team."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant colonel started toward the golf cart. A walkie-talkie lay on the seat. "Right away."

"Just a minute, sir." Buckmaster shoved the six golf balls further out toward the general. "Allow me to test them for you. Pick a ball, sir."

The general pulled his hand back to the ribbon representing a paper combat in Vietnam.

"Gunning, pick a ball."

The lieutenant colonel pointed to a ball. Buckmaster set the others on the ground and the one on a tee. He deferentially helped himself to a driver from Gunning's bag and took a few practice swings. He smiled at Gunning, who, like Battle, had retreated.

"Something like Russian roulette, isn't it, sir?"

Contact had a good solid feel and the ball took flight, long and true, and landed a few feet from the cup. Buckmaster looked apologetic.

"It's a long time since I've played."

The general's thin red line withdrew into the zone of the interior. He stepped up to his own ball, swung savagely. The ball landed far short of Buckmaster's and in the rough.

"Gunning, this hoax, or whatever it is, is not only in very bad taste, it is also putting me off my game." He pointed east, his West Point ring glittering. "I want this man out of my sight. But first get his name and serial number."

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"Corporal, the general wants you out of his sight." Gunning drew out a small pad and a ballpoint pen. "But first give your name and serial number."

"Yes, sir. Cpl. Oscar Flugel, 876-54-321."

He saluted, about-faced, got into the cart and drove away. Disbelief rooted them long enough.

"Corporal! Bring that cart back! Want a court-martial?"

He gave it all it had, and it outdistanced feet, and the next "Corporal!" was breathless and fainter, though louder and fiercer at the end. When he looked back before topping a green hill, the last he saw of the general the general was clubbing an invisible snake to death. Buckmaster supposed that was par for the course.

Once out of sight, he changed course and made for the line of trees, wheeled into concealment, and braked. Smiling, he picked up the walkie-talkie. Much simpler and far faster to use this link than to try getting his plight through the hole in Old Rivet Divot's head.

He pressed the send switch and opened his mouth. He closed his mouth. Damn. Why hadn't he let Gunning call HQ? He would have learned the official communications signal. Now, lacking it, he might make HQ suspicious. Have to fake it.

"...you read? Do you read? Over."

It was a long second.

"Bravo Base to Bravo One. You are coming in garbled. Request you say again your last message. Over."

"Bravo One to Bravo Base. Where've you been? Never mind. This is urgent. How do you copy, Bravo Base?"

"Bravo One from Bravo Base. Read you loud and clear, Bravo One. Go ahead. Over."

"Bravo One to Bravo Base. By order of the commanding general, there will be an immediate and intensive lookout for a large black soldier with a beard. His name may or may not be Miles Messmore. His nickname may or may not be Zulu. He may or may not be driving a truck. Do not, repeat not, attempt to apprehend. Simply report such sighting at once. Over."

"Understand. Stand by, please. Over."

Bravo One stood by. All hung on HQ getting back to him with the sighting before the general and his aide found a way of getting through to HQ. He had no way of telling how many minutes passed. He filled the time by unpinning the corporal's stripes and by threading the golf cart through the trees to a road of graying blacktop. A signpost told him he had hit Service Road Foxtrot. At least he had the beginnings of bearings. Bravo One stood by.

The walkie-talkie crackled. "Bravo Base to Bravo One. Come in, please, Bravo One."

"Bravo One. Do you have a sighting?"

"Affirmative, Bravo One. A Pfc. answering the description and driving a motor pool six-by carrying supplies to a 29th Infantry bivouac, has just passed Outpost No. 1 onto Reservation and is heading west on Service Road Echo. Do

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we put a tail on the subject? Over."

"Negative. Stand by for further orders. Over."

Was Foxtrot north or south of Echo? On a map the alphabet would descend: therefore, south. He twisted the golf cart north through the woods.

Service Road Echo was long, straight, and empty. He waited. This was way out on Echo. If it had just passed Outpost No. 1, the six-by-six could not have got by him yet. He waited. Either something was keeping Messmore, or Messmore had turned off. Buckmaster drove east on Echo, which remained long, straight, and empty. Ahead lay only Outpost No. 1.

Buckmaster swung the cart around and drove west on Echo, hunting a turnoff that wasn't there. Doing a double take, he swung around again and retraced a hundred meters. At one point the woods had a thin look. He stopped. Through a tall screen of brush at the edge of the road he saw what looked to be an old firebreak stretching back into denseness.

He studied the shoulder of the road and saw the start of a scratchy arc. A gate of movable brush? Just that. He drove the golf cart in, swung the gate back in place, cached the cart but kept the walkie-talkie, and followed the firebreak and the six-by-six wheeltracks in the dirt.

"Bravo Base to Bravo One. Come in, please, Bravo One."

The voice had an uncertain, edgy quality now. Gunning must have busted a gut getting to a phone. By order of the commanding general, there would be an immediate and intensive search-and-seizure operation, objective a white corporal whose name might or might not be Oscar Flugel.

"Bravo Base to Bravo One. Where are you, Bravo One? We have further information for you. Come in, Bravo One."

Buckmaster turned its insistence down. He started to unsling the walkie-talkie. He changed his mind. It was still a link, and he might need a link if he ran into something worse than the general's anger.

The firebreak flared into a clearing. A compound filled the clearing. A big sign hung on the wire-mesh gate — RESTRICTED AREA. POSITIVELY NO ADMITTANCE. Inside the chain-link fence and under camouflage netting, an olive-drab tractor-trailer with the look of a communications van seemed to serve as HQ building. The only structures were a tower — no more than a ladder with diving platforms at regular heights but with a sand box at its foot in place of a pool — and a twenty-foot-diameter Fuller dome under another camouflage net. Buckmaster slid to cover.

The bearded black Miles "Zulu" Messmore, in Pfc. fatigues, unloaded cartons from a six-by-six into the dome, which made that the supply room. Besides the six-by-six and the tractor-trailer, there were a command car and a jeep in the shade of trees overhanging the fence.

Buckmaster moved himself a tree nearer.

A tin voice blasted from the compound. "Halt. This installation is a restricted area. Only authorized person-

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nel may enter. Do not proceed any further. Turn around and go back."

Buckmaster threw himself flat. Slowly he peered around the base of a tree trunk. Zulu had frozen, holding a double armful of cartons, his eyes scanning the surround. The door of the van opened, and Cpl. Oscar Flugel leaned out, called to Zulu, and pointed toward Buckmaster's position. Both gazed Buckmaster's way, but he felt sure they could not see him. Still, they knew someone was there.

He looked around him. Sensors, posing as pebbles or even animal droppings, picked up and relayed heat, scent, sight, sound. There had to be a monitoring device aboard the trailer. He reached out and grabbed a pine cone that looked too much like a pine cone. He hefted it and felt it and confirmed its artificiality. He flung it away from him.

It must have landed near another sensor, for it promptly triggered the tin voice, plainly now an automatic taped warning.

Messmore dropped the cartons, and Flugel pulled back into the trailer. Zulu produced an M-16 from the cab of his truck. Flugel reappeared and pointed toward where the pine cone had ended up. Zulu moved nearer the fence, following the fix of his eyes. Zulu stopped, turned to face Flugel, shook his head, and rippled his hand. He put the M-16 back in the cab of his truck and returned to his unloading. Flugel stood a moment in the doorway, then went inside.

Buckmaster looked around. At first he saw nothing, then a quiver gave it away. A squirrel sat upright, staring at him. He saluted it and it rippled away.

He watched Messmore finish unloading and join Flugel in the long van. No better time than now. Waiting till dark would not keep the sensors from pinpointing him. He got to his feet but did not step away from the tree. He looked up and traced a jagged line of limbs and spaces. It seemed a long time since he had played Tarzan. But getting off the ground should get him out of sensor range. He climbed the tree and crawled out on a limb.

It *was* a long time since he had played Tarzan. But he made it to a limb of a tree overhanging the fence without shaming his ancestry or at least without falling. He dropped onto the hood of the command car, jumped, and landed running.

He dashed for the cab of the six-by-six and got the M-16. Freud was right: it seemed to Buckmaster that he had never felt so potent in his life. He strode to the van, stepped up to the door and kicked it in.

"Okay, you bastards, I've got you surrounded."

His jaw was the one that dropped.

15. CYA Cover your ass

Messmore, wearing a dazzling dashiki, sat at a snowy-tableclothed table, plying knife and fork on a steak. A bottle stood in an ice bucket; part of a Rothschild label peeped out of the napkin. Flugel stood at a microwave oven, plattering a thick porterhouse; he put it down at the third setting on the table before glancing at Buckmaster.

"What's been keeping you, Lieutenant?"

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"I've been playing golf with the commanding general."

The bastards. They didn't have the decency to look scared or guilty or anything but sure of themselves. Messmore gave him a chewing smile.

"Nice comeback, Lieutenant."

"From Okefenokee?"

"That too, Lieutenant. That too. Sit yourself down, Lieutenant, and dig in. If you want to wash up first, the washroom's in that corner."

"Zulu's right, Lieutenant. Eat before it gets cold."

Flugel sat down at his own place and set to. Messmore put down knife and fork.

"Uh-oh. Lieutenant's trigger finger's itching. Show you something, Lieutenant. I'll move real slow." Messmore reached inside his dashiki and drew out a full clip of M-16 ammo. "I switched an empty clip for this."

Buckmaster pointed the M-16 between the two men and pulled the trigger. An empty click. Messmore shook his head sadly, then brightened.

"Got to hand it to you, though, loot, you're a real swinger." He nodded at Buckmaster's start. "Yeah. Some of those sensors see and don't give away that they see. Take a look around that partition."

Buckmaster stepped around the dinette and came face to face with a sophisticated communications console. One monitor showed the cab of the six-by-six. He walked back slowly to find Messmore playing *sommelier*. Messmore smiled, concentrating.

"The champagne cork must come out gently, like a sigh."

The cork came out like a sigh. He filled the three glasses.

Buckmaster let out an ungentle sigh and folded into the empty chair. He gulped his drink down and saw Messmore wince and look his pain at Flugel.

"All right, you two. What the hell is this all about?"

"Money, man, money." Messmore took a connoisseurish sip. "Relax, Lieutenant. Give the man a hot towel, Talley. A hot towel before meals relaxes you. Picked that up in Japan. Stirs memories of mammaries, I guess; takes you back to mama's nice warm breast."

"Never mind that. Just tell me before I explode." Talley. That was something new. Was that Oscar Flugel's real name?

Flugel wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. "Frankly, Lieutenant, if you had died on us, that would have been ideal. But you're alive and well and in Fort Benning. That still leaves you in a bind, because here you've been executive officer of the Tenth Experimental Company for well over a week and you have a nice fat bank account that opened on the day you went on the roster, proving you threw in with us as soon as you found out our racket. Be mighty hard for you to blow the whistle now. So make yourself to home, Lieutenant. You're among friends. If you're friendly, we're friendly. If not, Okefenokee should've shown you we're playing for high stakes."

Messmore forklifted a chunk of steak high in the air. "Mighty high, Lieutenant."

Buckmaster still did not know what the racket was, but he thought it would

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be nice to know who was in it.

"Who else is in this besides Lt. Fiordaliso?" He saw them eye each other. "What about Capt. Clapsaddle?"

Messmore almost choked on his bite, then swallowed it. "Capt. *Romeo* Clapsaddle, Lieutenant. Yeah, he's in it. So are the whole two hundred men. Only you don't see them around, do you?"

Buckmaster stared at the two of them. They made quite a pair. Messmore had the kind of pleasant face that can quickly turn mean; Flugel had the kind of mean face that can quickly turn pleasant.

"Don't tell me you wasted all of them the way you tried to waste me?"

Messmore looked thoughtful. "I suppose that would've been one way of doing it. But, no, we did it the easy way. Fort Zinderneuf without the bodies. Only punch cards. Talley here's the mastermind. You tell him Talley."

Talley told him. Talley's eyes shone in the telling.

All three were in the Personnel Service Division. Cpl. Oscar Flugel was really Warrant Officer Marshall Talley; he headed the Military Pay Branch. Pfc./Sgt. Miles "Zulu" Messmore was really Warrant Officer Hannibal Zwinger; he headed the Machine Processing Unit of the Administrative Machine Branch. Lt. Juliet Fiordaliso was Lt. Juliet Fiordaliso; she headed the Personnel Records Branch. The three of them covered all loopholes.

The whole scheme stemmed from Par. 2-7, AR 37-104-2.

> Officers and enlisted members in all grades may arrange for pay checks to be deposited to their accounts with a bank or savings institution by submtiting a request for payment by check to the commanding officer for approval. The request must include the name and address of the bank; the account number, if any; and a statement that satisfactory arrangements have been made with the bank to accept such checks for deposit. The request will be forwarded to the members' personnel officer. A request for revocation of a previously designated bank or savings facility will be sent through the unit commander to the personnel officer. An officer or warrant officer may submit the completed forms directly to the personnel officer.

"We have set up in the computer a make-believe outfit with make-believe soldiers. Two hundred names on tape are collecting and depositing money that winds up in three — and now four — bank accounts."

Buckmaster nodded, then frowned. "Why Tenth *Experimental* Company?"

Talley smiled. "That's in AR 37-104 too. Comes under incentive pay for hazardous duty. Experimental stress duty means a private under four months draws fifty dollars per month extra; and on up to an officer of pay grade 0-6, who draws two hundred and forty-five dollars per month extra." He put his hand up. "And that's not all. Any member of the Armed Forces who performs more than one type of hazardous duty essential to the unit's mission may receive double incentive pay. Man,

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every damn soldier in the Tenth receives double incentive pay. Lieutenant, you might like to know you're in the most hazardous outfit in the whole damn Army."

It was Buckmaster's turn to smile. "I knew that before I got here. What's the experimental stress duty we're supposed to be exposing ourselves to? Or is that make-believe too?"

Talley laughed. "You know, nobody's come around and asked so far. But then no one's known about the Tenth so far." He paused and frowned. "I've been wondering how come out of the blue they assigned you."

"Maybe I'll tell you some time. But go on."

"Well, I planned in depth for that contingency. Show him. Zulu."

Zulu shoved himself away from the table and left them alone for a moment. He came back carrying a pair of jump boots with the look of platform shoes till Buckmaster saw that the extra-thick white soles clamped on. He handed them to Buckmaster.

Buckmaster shook his head. "You're showing me, but what are you showing me?"

"Lieutenant, if you think I'd go out there and jump any time, much less on a full stomach, just to show you, you're crazy. You saw that tower out there? You see this pair of shoes? Put one and two together, and you'll see."

Talley jumped in. "It's simple, Lieutenant. You know how many paratroopers there are who break their leg bones and smash their feet? Even in practice jumps? I call these Crushees. They're a crumple foam that takes most of the shock of landing. They clip on like skis. Once you land you throw them away. That's what the Tenth is testing if anyone asks." He took them from Buckmaster and fondled them wistfully. His face firmed. "But nobody will. I keyed into the computer that it report any inquiry about the Tenth and any travel orders or tours of inspection scheduled for the same. Nobody takes us by surprise; we'll just fold up our tents."

He gave Buckmaster a sly look. "Got a printout on you soon as we got word you were coming, Lieutenant. Do you know your file is flagged? You're under a constant security check because of your father."

Buckmaster's face burned. He remembered the look Col. Fubb had given Lt. Landtroop. They weren't to trust him with knowledge of TOTE — whatever TOTE was. Fubb the cuckold and Landtroop the sin of commission. All right, if that was the way the Army played, FTA — and he didn't mean Free Time Association. He was in it with these bastards, and not just because he seemed to have no choice. But even they would have to watch out. He was in it for himself.

But how smug they seemed. Do them and him good if he shook them up some. The walkie-talkie hung at his side. He swung it up and spoke into it. They would not know it was off.

"Bravo One to Bravo Base. Now that you have all that, you know how to proceed. Out."

He switched from off to receive, sleight of hand to cinch the effect.

In a smooth flow of movement

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Messmore-Zwinger grabbed the M-16 Buckmaster had set down, switched the full clip for the empty, and took a stand at one side of the door.

"Take it easy, Talley. We have a hostage."

The hostage poured himself another glass of champagne and took a sip.

Talley looked pale and shrunken. His voice was a whisper.

"You're CID. I knew it. I knew this would happen if we played out our string too long." His face went pleasant and his whisper persuasive. "Look, Lieutenant, nobody got hurt. We've scored big. Millions. We can make a deal before they get here. Listen, —"

The walkie-talkie crackled with Maj. Gen. Reeber Battle's cold anger. Buckmaster could almost see the general's chin going double as he deepened his voice. "Cpl. Oscar Flugel, I shall find you. And when I do I promise you the *fairest* court-martial the Army has ever seen."

Buckmaster eyed Flugel-Talley's distorted face through the champagne glass. The man had grown paler and more shrunken.

"Yes, take it easy, Talley. I only wanted to get some of my own back at you. The general thinks *I'm* Cpl. Oscar Flugel. I took your name in vain. The blood in his eye is for me."

He turned his head to watch Messmore-Zwinger bring the M-16 to bear on him. The man's brow pleated. His eyes glittered as though from inner flashes.

"You oughtn't to get me this excited, Lieutenant. I get these migraines." He held still as the infantryman statue, then slowly lowered the M-16. He squeezed water out of his eyes, then wiped them with a thumb and forefinger. His mien faded to a pleasanter pleasant than Talley's. "Hand me the walkie-talkie, Lieutenant." When he had it he dropped it and stomped it useless. "Don't want them getting a fix on us by accident or otherwise. Make my own accident."

Buckmaster studied Zwinger. It was easier to think of him as Zulu.

"Zulu, you'd better shave off your beard. I set the whole post to looking for a big black with a beard."

Zulu's grin spread the beard. His hand made a magician's pass and peeled off the beard. "Why wait?" His grin spread chipmunk cheeks. "Here's the naked truth. The way I am when I'm on duty at the Machine Processing Unit."

That started a train of thought in the dark tunnels of Buckmaster's mind. "Yes, what about duty? How are you two free to run around?"

Talley was back in control of himself and the situation. "We don't usually. Running the Tenth takes only a weekend now and then. But soon as we got word of your coming, we both took our furloughs to be free to handle you." He eyed Buckmaster and his face twitched. "You know, Lieutenant, in a way I'm glad you're in this with us now. We draw our millions without the Army wondering about an extra two hundred men, but we haven't figured a way of phasing it out. If two hundred men go over the hill together, or if a phony case of food poisoning or epidemic of spinal meningitis wastes them, or if a bogus

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bomb wipes out their base, the Army will wonder."

"Great. And I'm supposed to help you sweat that out?"

"You may not like us, Lieutenant, but you'll sure love the money. Now you're here you can man the Tenth full time. True, you lost your papers, but the computer don't know that. Not much for you to do. Only convince the computer the Tenth is a real Army unit. That means it has the regulation number of fuckups. Right, Zulu? That's the part Zulu likes, playing God. Let's show the lieutenant how it works."

They adjourned to the communications section of the van. Zulu sat down at the computer terminal. He raised the roster of the Tenth Experimental Company on the screen.

Buckmaster read the name above his own and shook his head. "Did you have to name him Romeo Clapsaddle?"

Zulu laughed. "That's Juliet Fiordaliso's dream man. She didn't like it either." He rubbed his hands. "Speaking of courts-martial, like Old Rivet Divot just was, we got to dish out punishment as well as reward. See, we programmed the computing of required time in pay grade; automatic promotions and pay increases follow. But we still have to keep up the look of a going outfit — soldiers after all do fuck up. The roster won't pass muster if it stays nice and fuckless month after month."

He began tapping away as he spoke. "I think we'll have to bust Sgt. Bannerman one grade for inefficiency, though I hate to do it to a member of the cadre. I think we'll promote Cpl. Warmath in his place. We'll redline Pfc. Saladino this month. And let's see, we Article 15 a few others at random, and that does it." Zulu cleared the screen. "Any questions, Lieutenant?"

"What happened to the former XO?"

Talley took it. "The same orders that transferred you here called for him to present himself at the Pentagon for reassignment. But we told the computer he had a prior commitment to death. Poor guy died testing Crushees."

Zulu took it from there. "Yeah, he was a psycho. Got up in the middle of the night yelling 'Geronimo!' and climbed the tower and jumped from the top platform. Only Talley has it wrong, the guy didn't stop to put on his Crushees."

Talley looked annoyed. "It's not that I have it wrong, it's just part of the cover up. We fixed it so he died in line of duty."

Buckmaster smiled. They nearly had him believing them. They smiled and Talley's smile grew sly.

"That's another moneymaker. The next of kin of each man is one of our bank accounts. I told you this is the most hazardous company in the Army. You'd never guess how many lives the Tenth has given to its country."

No doubt Col. Fubb had guessed — or thought he guessed.

Buckmaster eyed the two men. "What started you on this?"

Talley's smile faded. "I wasn't able to swing the down payment on a farm I had my eye on to retire to. After twenty years I felt I rated something better than that. So I set up my own little equity funding."

Zulu nodded, but kept his smile.

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"The Man owes me one too. Better to scuffle for pennies than to fight for The Man for nickels and dimes,, my granny always told me. But I say it's still better to do The Man out of the sawbucks."

Now both eyed Buckmaster and it was Talley's turn to ask.

"What do you say, Lieutenant? How do you feel about it?"

"*Viel besser:* lots better. But after all I've been through I want a full and equal share."

"I have to say it, Lieutenant, you're cool."

"Any cooler, he'd be dead." Zulu looked at Buckmaster but spoke to Talley. "But *I* got the feeling he's still in the open field."

Buckmaster's jaw went lumpy. Then he smiled it smooth. "What do you want? A blood oath?"

Talley's hand moved placatingly. "Just your word. The word of an officer and a gentleman. Are you with us?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Many's the saint who'd've sold his soul to the devil — only the devil wasn't buying. And I'm no saint."

They shook on it.

Talley opened a closet, baring a wardrobe of uniforms bearing assorted rank, and lifted a flap of flooring and worked the combination of a floor safe. He handed Buckmaster a thick wad.

"Here you go, Lieutenant. Some walking-around money. Eat, drink, and bang Mary."

The new smoothness of his fingertips made it hard to riffle through. He settled for hefting. A few thousand dollars at least. He would have to spend it to prove his good faith. He grinned. That seemed far from the worst of fates.

Zulu's brow suddenly pleated. His eyes registered inner lightning flashes. "My granny always told me, 'Don't chain your dog with links of sausage.'" Buckmaster didn't know if that was Zulu or Zulu's migraine talking, but this latest of Zulu's mood shifts chilled Buckmaster. Zulu calmed just as suddenly, though he raised a clenched fist. "But I'm getting out Juneteenth. You'll be all Talley's lookout after that."

They returned to the table and killed the bottle. The bubbles had got fewer, but this still looked to be the life. He could get up when he pleased and knock off when he pleased and do nothing in between. All furlough. A solid gold brick.

Only one thing he had to worry about — that the others would leave him holding the bag.

16. REQAURQN Request authority to requisition

Two goldbricking GIs, Zulu and Talley, stiff with effort and care, were marching in step a dozen feet apart pretending to tote a big sheet of glass. A third GI, Buckmaster himself, reading a letter fresh from mail call, a letter written on red drawers, walked through between them unseeing.

Buckmaster woke to find Zulu standing over him. Buckmaster had been bunking down luxuriously in the van for three days and nights now, catching up on sleep and getting the hang of the operation. Zulu and Talley had left him on his own much of the time. They were making the most of what remained of their furloughs. At

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the moment, shades and a mustache changed Zulu into someone neither Messmore nor Zwinger. He seemed to be in his good mood.

"Come to take the six-by out for a run to the Atlanta Army Supply Depot. Got anything you want to add to our shopping list?"

Buckmaster put his hands behind his head and lay back thinking. He rolled his head no. "Can't think of a thing."

"Maybe you want to ride into Columbus with me? I'll drop you off and pick you up on my way back."

Buckmaster had planned to immure himself till he had total control of the SOP. He had already found that the payroll was only a spit in the ocean to what was available. Talley had managed to patch the console into AUTODIN, the Department of Defense's worldwide communications network that interchanged data involving finance, personnel, logistics, intelligence, and operational management information for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and other defense agencies. And with the Tenth Experimental Company field-testing and evaluating products of the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency, they had access to nonaccountable funds. He felt sure there was more to learn.

But the sun had rolled a golden carpet all the way in through the door. Besides, they wanted him to spend his wad. Besides, he had to get to know Zulu. First thing a soldier does before he cleans a rifle is look at the number to make sure he's cleaning his own. First thing an officer does on assuming command is have a friendly chat with his top kick. Besides, another bird with the same stone, he'd take Joe Dee's uniform back to the guy. Early for Dee to be there but he'd find Sally. He smiled thinking of the look on Kaster's face when Lt. Stonewall J. Buckmaster walked in. He got up.

"You can drop me off at the FTA coffeehouse. I think you know where it is."

"Believe I do." Zulu handed him a new ID. "You're Lt. Buckmaster, but not of the Tenth Experimental. The Tenth X has to exist only in the computer, dig it? You're XO of a 29th Infantry headquarters company. You don't have to wait on me. You have your own transportation. You can jeep in and out of the Reservation whenever you like. Anybody asks, you're checking up on bivouacs."

"I'll ride in with you this time."

"Okay. I'll have the six-by gassed up time you're ready."

Zulu was putting empty jerry cans in the back of the truck when Buckmaster came out. Buckmaster hopped into the cab.

"Let's get this thing rolling."

He spoke lightly, but now Zulu was in his bad mood.

"Hustlers don't call showdowns." Zulu climbed in slowly and pointed his index finger at Buckmaster and cocked his thumb. "Don't think because we didn't finish you off in the swamp we're afraid to. Give us any flak and we will. Same goes if we find out you're shucking us." He settled in and got the thing rolling. "I tried to play The Man's game his way. Now I do it my way. And it's

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paying off. Money don't get everything, it's true, but what it don't get I can't use. So if you make yourself worrisome or troublesome, you better make yourself scarce."

Damn Zulu and his short fuse. Just when he had begun to like the man in spite of himself. If anyone had cause for anger it was Buckmaster. Sooner or later his own anger at Zulu would surface, and they would have it out. Even if not, sooner or later Zulu would turn on him. There ought to be some way of getting an edge over Zulu against that time of reckoning.

"Yeah." Zulu took savage pleasure in his pain. "I'm feeling real evil." Zulu's writhing temples looked real evil. "Migraine."

"That's an increment of excrement. It's all in your mind."

"Don't tell me my illness is an illusion, or you'll wake up trying to tell yourself your death is a delusion."

"Sure, the suffering is real enough. I know about migraine because my mother was a sufferer."

"You don't know about it when it's yourgraine not mygraine."

"I've read up on it. Ever think of trying biofeedback?"

"How would it apply?"

"You psych yourself. If you have an ulcer, you use biofeedback to train your mind to control the amount of gastric juices your stomach secretes. Should work for migraines. Tension is a beta-rhythm state. Relaxed alertness is an alpha-rhythm state. You'd learn to induce alpha rhythms. And whenever you feel tension coming on, you'd switch to alpha."

"Man, I'll try anything. How do I start?"

"Think the Atlanta Army Supply Depot carries biofeedback machines?"

"Carries everything from The Pill to autopsy saws, from tent poles to field hospitals." Zulu's good mood returned.

Unable to find a parking slot nearer the FTA coffeehouse, Zulu pulled up alongside a NO PARKING HERE TO CORNER sign.

Buckmaster smiled. A minor infraction alongside their major larcenies, but all the same.... "Don't you see the sign?"

Zulu got out, bent the perforated steel standard back and forth in the concrete footing till it snapped, and tossed it aside.

"What sign?"

Buckmaster climbed out carrying Dee's rolled-up uniform and walked Zulu to the FTA coffeehouse.

The door opened but the place was silent and looked empty. Then Sally Kaster stepped out of the back room. She added another smudge to her brow and leaned against the doorway. She stared at the two of them, at Buckmaster's lieutenancy and Zulu's beardless MP-lessness, then shook her head and found her voice.

"I'm all right, it's just that I, you know, sometimes see things."

"So does the lieutenant. He thought he saw a sign."

"Borrow your typewriter, Sally?"

She had another spell of wordlessness and waved them in.

Zulu drew a requisition form from his breast pocket and rolled it in the typewriter. Buckmaster saw a Lt. S. J.

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Buckmaster had signed the form. Zulu looked at Buckmaster.

"Machine, biofeedback, right?"

"Should do. You can fill in the model number when you get there. And get a good pocket flashlight for me."

"What for?"

"All the light I have out there is in the van. Suppose there's a blackout? What if the Army, not knowing you tied the van's umbilical to the power line, says let there be darkness, cuts if off for some reason?"

"It won't." But Zulu shrugged. "Costs me nothing, don't know why I'm arguing."

He typed in one dozen flashlights, pocket, complete with batteries. He stopped himself from rolling the form and its carbons out.

"Damn, I almost forgot. Fiordaliso wants chocolate and peanut butter. Bet I know why I disremembered. I love both — and I have to steer clear of both account of my migraine. Yeah, and hair spray. Wonder why I disremembered that?"

He typed the items in rapidly, fingers heavy on the keys. His migraine had started again, and Buckmaster was glad to see him go.

Kaster put her hands on her hips and winged out her elbows. She wore a yellow sweater and the stance and her slenderness shaped her into a danger sign on a post.

"All right now, Wallstone, maybe you'll make it all clear to me."

"Sure. But first, I came back to repay a loan."

He had noted a cot in the corner of the room, and he locked the front door — Dee had not yet fixed the one to the back room — and occupied her too much for questioning. Or thought he had. Her dreaminess faded and she shoved up and away.

"All right, Wallstone. Now." But her glance fell on the desk and she looked guiltily defiant. "Maybe I ought to tell you something first." She handed him a sheet of copy for the coming issue of FTA. "Joe didn't want to mention the name Tenth Experimental Company because they might get him for breach of national security — *real* national security, you know, not Nixon national security. So we're making it a blind item."

He read the copy where she pointed: *The question of the week. What experimental unit at Ft. Benning is posing a threat to the ecosystem?*

His grin both nettled and encouraged her. "Now you. Why are you and that soldier running around in disguise; so buddy-buddy now and so enemy-enemy before?"

"It was a security foulup. I guess Joe told you I went to see the general? Well, I spoke to him and cleared it all up."

She looked doubtful but moved on to her next question. "What *does* the Tenth Experimental do?"

"What does the Tenth X do?" He was stalling and knew it and knew that she knew it. Crushees seemed too tame, not destructive enough of the environment. As long as there would be a blind item anyway, might as well go the whole hog and give her a good Hitchcockian McGuffin. "If I tell you will you watch out how you word it? Because Joe's

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right to be careful. It *is* a matter of *real* national security."

She nodded and he went on.

"The Soviets have a carbon-dioxide laser. It can take out incoming missiles up to three hundred miles away." That much was true — or at least that much he had read. Now he was winging it. "Our comeback is something that bounces the laser beam right back. It's a coating material we call Mirrorite. Mirrorite is everywhere reflective. You can't work it with an ordinary laser, much less penetrate it." He eyed his fingertips ruefully. "Rough stuff to handle." He looked up at her with a brave smile. "I can't tell you any more than that."

"I understand, Jackson."

She took his hands in hers and kissed the fingertips. He drew her back down on the cot. This time it was not merely to occupy her. He felt himself beginning to feel something real for her and so for himself.

When he looked at the hour again, he disengaged himself and got up. Still plenty of time before Zulu came back to pick him up, but the troops would be showing up soon, and a lieutenant couldn't very well hang around an EM's hangout. He repaid her the ten and left a thousand for the cause. Still speechless, she saw him to the door.

As he reached the corner and glanced at the fallen sign, a horn honked. Zulu back already for the honky? Car horn rather than truck horn, though, and it didn't have to be for him; he wasn't the only one on the street. He turned the corner, and the honking followed close behind him.

He didn't look around. He hated for someone to blow a horn at him even to warn him. Let the driver speak to him as human to human, not as powerful machine to vulnerable human. The machine insisted. He stopped and turned.

Oh, no.

17. MOS Military occupational specialty

Oh, yes.

Blonde poodle curls. Blue glitter on the eyelids. Maggie Fubb.

Her open convertible pulled up and he got in. She offered her cheek, then changed her mind and withdrew it.

"Who was that freaky stringbean?"

"How'd you happen to find me?"

"No happen about it. I've been riding around town for days trying to spot you. I helloed the Fort first thing, and what a runaround. Nobody's heard of the Tenth Experimental Company. Stupid girl lieutenant in Personnel claims there's no Lt. Buckmaster at Benning. But I knew damn well you were down here. So I've been staying at a motel and asking around. And riding around trying to spot you."

"How did you know damn well?"

"Lt. Landtroop. You know him? I twisted it out of him."

He looked at her as she drove. How would she have gone to work on Landtroop? Her serene profile stayed serene, just a slight thrust of the jaw.

"Who is she?" Maggie sounded too offhand.

"She's on the staff of the FTA — an underground sheet. You know the sort of thing: very antiestablishment, loves to knock the Army. I went there trying

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to learn how they got wind of the Tenth X. We got a tip they're printing a blind item about it. It could be a serious breach of security."

"Oh." Maggie's face reddened and her voice shook with rage. "I don't know what's got into kids these days. No loyalty, no patriotism."

Maggie on loyalty made him think of Col. Fubb. How was good old Max coming along with his precious TOTE? And what in hell was TOTE? Maybe he could pump Maggie. He suddenly realized that what he was eyeing now wasn't simply the bunching up of her dress. He stared. How had she blown up seven months' worth in two weeks?

She caught him in the corner of her eye and laughed. She patted her belly. "At ease, in there. I swear it's wearing combat boots." She laughed again, a bit shortly. "Don't worry, it isn't your kid. It isn't anyone's."

"Parthenogenesis?"

"What's that?"

"The next best thing to propinquity."

"Wait till we're in my motel room and I'll show you."

It proved to be an egg-shaped satin pillow with ribbon trim that tied around.

"A pregnancy puff. A put-on. Folks just love to help corner a rat who's run out on his girl." She untied it and *embonpoint* no longer came between them. "What were you saying about propinquity?"

"I don't know if I'm up to it, Maggie."

Her eyes narrowed, and he knew they were replaying the freaky stringbean. He held up his hands to show his fingertips.

"I've been in an accident."

"Oh, you poor boy. But you don't need your hands now, darling. Here, let me." She tore at the buttons of his jacket. One flew off. "I'll sew it on later."

Later would have to wait awhile. Sex came first, pillow talk came second.

"Poor Stoney. Tell me about the accident. It happen in your work with the Tenth Experimental?"

He told her about Mirrorite. Her interest encouraged him to embellish. Mirrorite acquired the property of so altering any laser beam bouncing off it that the laser beam transformed what it touched on the way back into a spot of antimatter that exploded because of its ambience.

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Means any laser gun that shoots at our Mirrorite-coated missiles or planes blows up."

"That could really decide an all-out war, couldn't it?"

"You bet it could."

"How operational is Mirrorite?"

"Sorry, Maggie." It felt good to be gently firm. "You know I can't tell even you. I've already told you more than I should've."

Her frown cleared away and she kissed him. "No, I'm the one who's sorry, Stoney." She rose. "You stay put, dear, while I sew on the button."

He started to doze off, then remembered. "Maggie."

"Hmmm?"

"Maybe you can tell me something. What do you know about TOTE?"

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"TOTE? Never heard of it." If her voice had gone flat, that might have been because he had caught her in the middle of biting off the thread.

18. BIOLDEF Biological defense

Talley picked him up in the morning. Buckmaster had walked from the motel to a pay phone in the heart of town, called Fort Benning, got through to Lt. Fiordaliso and asked her to pass the word for Zulu or Talley to pick him up.

Talley looked surly, greeting him with only a nod. He pulled the jeep away with a jerk before Buckmaster fairly settled himself.

"You had us shitting bricks, Lieutenant."

"Gold bricks, I'm sure."

"When Zulu stopped by to pick you up and you weren't there and nobody knew where you were — I'm telling you. What happened?"

"I met an old friend."

"I hope she was worth it. You should've let us know you were going to be out all night."

"I'm not standing still for bed check, Charlie. I'm an equal partner, remember?"

"Yeah, and an officer and a gentleman. You remember this, Buckmaster. I'm not your chauffeur. If anyone pulls rank, I do."

Suddenly Talley cut sharp left and then cut sharp right, took a short cut through a filling station, doubled back, pulled into an alley and watched the street.

"Someone after us?"

"Thought a red Chevy was tailing us." He waited another minute, then got the jeep going again. "If it was, we lost it."

They rode the rest of the way in silence, Talley watching the rear-view mirror as much as the road ahead.

Zulu too looked surly but it was himself he was sore at. He had put himself to extra work by typing the wrong figure in the requisition, and cartons of Mist-Tress hair-spray canisters overflowed the supply room. He showed Buckmaster the one carton he had set aside for Lt. Fiordaliso.

"Easier to take it all than say it was a mistake. But what we going to do with all that hair spray?"

"The devil made you do it. Wants you to finish his work and deplete the ozone." Buckmaster was glad to see his package of pocket flashlights. It had struck him that Zulu might bring back a generator of their own instead. "Forget the embarrassment of riches. You get the biofeedback machine?"

"Yeah, it's in the console section. Still in the crate. Sure hope it works because I feel that damn migraine coming on again."

They moved forward in the van, and Zulu and Buckmaster unpacked the machine. Buckmaster spotted the sheet of directions and misdirected Zulu with a toss of wrapping while slipping it into his pocket.

"What pattern do you see when your migraine's about to begin?"

"Like a honeycomb design. How do you know I see a pattern?"

"That's from the firing of some visual cortex analyzer cells. My mother saw a sweeping arc."

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"I'm not your mother."

"In a strangely endearing way you remind me of her."

Zulu grimaced a grin. "She could be evil too, huh?"

"She had her moments."

Zulu pawed through the wrapping paper and the padding. "Where's the poop sheet?"

"We don't need one. I know how the thing works."

He wired Zulu up.

"You sure you know how the thing works?"

"You're going to learn to induce alpha rhythms at will. Look at the screen. See the pretty patterns? Think your hands warm.... Now think your hands cool.... See how the patterns change?"

The machine gave visual feedback — flashing colored lights — of the pattern of brain waves plus audio feedback — a pleasant tone that rose and fell in step with the EEG. Zulu fidgeted.

"Those the spikes that drive into my brain?"

Buckmaster answered something absently. He had found the dysrhythmic EEG he had hoped for. It meant Zulu had a disposition to epilepsy.

"So far I'm only getting chicken-feedback."

"You're doing fine. Keep it up. That's the pattern you want to get and hold on to."

A dirty trick to play on the man. But no dirtier than Okefenokee. In the short run it should do the man some good, the power of suggestion damping Zulu's migraine, making him think he felt less pain.

Talley looked in on them and watched till it got too boring for him. Then he went out, and Buckmaster heard the command car purr away, carrying Talley and his share of Zulu's haul.

Buckmaster thought ahead to tonight. That was as far ahead as a goldbricker thought, he thought. He would rest up and man the fort awhile — they were the same thing — then jeep into town. Only one problem.

Maggie or Sally?

Or Juliet?

Maybe he should get to know Lt. Juliet Fiordaliso better. Was that the real reason he had called her this morning? She had sounded warmly conspiratorial. No; better keep business and pleasure separate. Maggie-or-Sally was problem enough. Everyone should have such problems.

Thinking of problems, now he had to look out for a red Chevy. If there had been a red Chevy. It might have been Talley's imagination. Or Talley's vindictiveness, Talley's way of putting fear into him.

He looked at Zulu patched into the machine.

"How do you feel? Better?"

"I don't know. Different, anyway."

"Takes practice."

"Yeah, I suppose."

Buckmaster felt a twinge. He switched the machine off.

"That's more than enough for your first try."

19. FUPOSAT Follow up on supply action taken

A fly graphed a bad year — for it-

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self? the motel? the guests? — on the outside of the window screen. Buckmaster looked down at the bathroom sink. A bubble had uddered under the mouth of the faucet; it stretched without breaking, vibrating rapidly as the drops dripped from it.

The toothbrush was his. The toothpaste was theirs, his and Maggie's. He eyed the toothpaste tube. There had to be something Freudian in the way women squeezed it in the middle as against the way men milked it. He replaced the fluted fez on the tube.

Something was wrong. He had been putting off facing up to it. Maggie touched things, touched people, to make sure they were real; maybe to make sure she was real, to draw some of their reality to herself. He had felt a new nervousness in her touch since his returning for another night of love.

Love. He wasn't sure what he felt for her. Love? Love is a social disease, both immunizing and fatal. If you give yourself to love, you give yourself to both life and death. Had they given themselves to hate? Same mixture, different tincture.

The something that was wrong reflected itself in Maggie's eyes. There's an embarrassment when you keep running into someone you've said farewell to. Was that what he'd seen in her eyes when he'd returned? They had said farewell once. He hadn't forgotten the quiddity of her spitting at him and she hadn't forgotten the why.

Last night there had been a fight. "Maggie the camp follower." He still thought he had said it tenderly, but maybe there are words you can't say tenderly. Maggie had flung on her maxicoat and swept out. Had slammed out of the motel room — or would have but for the automatic door-closer that took its own good time. Running after her to bring her back, he had found her already coming back, remembering the room wasn't his but hers. Anger turned to laughter. And whatever it was he felt for her had been deeper and better.

"Do you have to go, Stoney? Back to the Tenth Experimental?"

He had to go, but not to the Tenth X. To the FTA coffeehouse to see Sally. To see whether what he felt for the one stood up in the face of what he felt for the other. He came out of his study and out of the bathroom and smiled gravely down at Maggie in bed.

"Duty."

"Duty. Always damn duty. First Max and now you." Her face seemed awash with unshed tears.

"How is Max?"

"As well as you can expect of a corpse."

Fubb hadn't been much good to her, but to call him a corpse.... Buckmaster turned but her voice followed.

"I'm not being bitchy. He died a week ago. Heart attack. TOTE was too much for him."

Buckmaster was still struggling with Col. Fubb's death, and TOTE almost got by him. "I thought you never heard of —"

The tears were no longer unshed. "Max is dead. I don't have anyone."

"You have me." The words dragged out.

"No, Stoney. It's over for us, no matter what I say or do now."

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He felt a mix of release and pique but had to make a show of something neither. "What do you mean, over?"

"I'm a sleeper."

Buckmaster grinned uneasily. He wouldn't ask if she meant she was promiscuous. If camp follower had set her off....

"You think I was an army brat like you, Stoney, but I wasn't. My parents took on American identities and merged into American life and brought me up to keep my Soviet loyalties always in the background against ... now."

He could feel his mind stretch, protein synthesize, synapses thicken. There was some kind of showdown. TOTE was its name. He moved nearer to shake TOTE out of her but stopped.

She had reached for her pregnancy puff, and a gun had flashed into her hand. The slit in the back of the puff had shown itself only when her hand thrust through and drew out the .22 that held him still.

"Poor Max. Did you think I wanted to be an easy lay?"

She was looking at Buckmaster and he shook his head for Max and himself. That seemed to satisfy her.

"That's right. I did it for my country. Only now I'm awaking into a nightmare. Which is my country?" She stared at Buckmaster and shook her head. "No, not poor Max: old Max never knew. Poor Stoney. Those poor FTA kids. Poor me."

She touched the reality of the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger. Her head fell back upon the pillow. She might have been sleeping but for the black ring and the blood rose.

He shook her. "What is TOTE?"

Maggie was. *Tod.*

Nothing he could do for her, nothing she could do for him. He slipped out. No sweat, though he felt the film of cold sweat. If anyone had heard the gunshot, television or backfire had subsumed it.

Poor FTA kids? He jeeped toward the FTA coffeehouse.

The red blur far ahead in traffic could have been a red Chevy, but it had too much of a lead; and though he ran a red light, he found he had lost it when he reached the corner where it had turned off.

20. MOP Mustering out pay

In the back room of the actionless coffeehouse flies were having a very busy season. Sally Kaster and Joe Dee sat dead, wire binding them to chairs. The stink of loosened sphincters filled the air. Poor little shit machines. Person or persons unknown had tried to make them talk before they died.

Talk about something they did not know. The Tenth X's whereabouts? Buckmaster's temples drummed. Talley hadn't been lying about shaking pursuit. Had Maggie's friends sought to pick up the trail here?

Why the Tenth X? Where did it fit into TOTE?

He made himself look at the two. He could at least do them that small penance. He had been their link to death.

There was only one link here to the Tenth X. Chances were that person or persons unknown had got out of Joe

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Dee that Joe had spoken to Lt. Fiordaliso on the phone to check out Jackson Wallstone and that the lieutenant had said there was no Tenth Experimental Company. Person or persons unknown would want to speak to Lt. Fiordaliso in person.

They would be people who would not believe the phony story about Crushees or the true story about the fraud.

He had to hurry. But he stayed long enough to pick the thousand dollars he had given Sally from the pile of their belongings and pocket it. The serial numbers might run in the same series as the twenties he still possessed. He didn't want a Watergate-burglars tie-in to these deaths.

21. SITREP Advise by rapid means, citing this message, present situation of following unit

He pulled up at the nearest pay phone. Lt. Fiordaliso recognized his voice, and hers took on the warm conspiratorial tone. He cut in.

"Listen, don't talk. This thing is blowing up. We all have to meet. If Zulu and Talley aren't at the van, tell them to get there on the double. Leave your office right now, leave HQ building. Give any excuse. Be careful. If you see a red Chevy on the post, don't let it see you. If you don't believe me, Talley knows about that. I'll pick you up at the PX. Look for me to come by in the jeep."

He made a hanging-up sound by tapping the phone against the box and listened. Fiordaliso let out an uncertain breath. Her breathing firmed up, and he heard her say, "Sergeant, I have to —" before she hung up.

For someone whose big score and whole career stood in danger Fiordaliso seemed strangely amused when he picked her up. She eyed him sidewise as he sped them toward Outpost No. 1.

"Did you knock her up? The bleached-out blonde? You know she came here looking for you and for the Tenth X."

"I know. No. She wore a pregnancy puff."

"Oh." Fiordaliso blinked, at the words, the toneless way he said them, or both. "I thought that might be why this thing is blowing up, that you and she had a lovers' quarrel or a lovers' heart-to-heart and you said too much."

"Nothing like that."

"Then like what?"

"Tell you when we're all together."

The mirror shared his gaze with the road, and Fiordaliso sat back away from him.

Zulu in his dashiki and slippers sat staring at the visual feedback of his brain waves, and Talley paced the console section. Talley stopped and glared at Buckmaster and Fiordaliso.

"This better be bad."

Buckmaster nodded reassuringly. "It is."

Fiordaliso spotted the carton of Mist-Tress hair spray canisters and turned to Zulu, who was unhooking himself from the biofeedback machine.

"Good. You got it."

"And a hell of a lot more." Zulu grinned dazedly. "For hair to eternity."

Buckmaster swelled. "For God's sake, you people. This is serious."

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Fiordaliso flushed. "I'm only trying to hold on to banality." She half smiled with a half shrug. "I mean, after all, if the whole thing's blowing up, what else is left?"

Talley snorted. "Let's have it, Buckmaster."

"We're in the middle of something with the code name TOTE."

"Never heard of it."

"Our friends in the red Chevy have. That's why they're after us."

"Who are they?"

"The Soviets."

"You got red on the brain, Lieutenant. I figure our friends for the CID."

Buckmaster nodded toward the computer terminal. "Check it out and see. TOTE is a war-room program."

Talley sat down at the keyboard, then shook his head. "The box? I'm not messing with that."

"Can you do it?"

"At HQ, I replaced the correct monitor with a rigged monitor of my own, which has special ins for unauthorized parties, but —"

"Skip the tech talk. Can you do it?"

Talley sweated. "I can override the run of systems security measures, but you need passwords and terminal identification."

"Then try."

Zulu's brow creased. "Get on with it, Talley. We got to know one way or the other."

Talley looked at Fiordaliso. She nodded. He shook his head again but poised his fingers over the keys. "All right, wise guy, give me a terminal identification. The box isn't going to deal with just anyone."

Buckmaster eased his breath out and nodded. "We'll be a CIA link."

"Fine. But what's our code name?"

Buckmaster smiled tightly. "It has to be something stupid enough for the spooks to think they're being clever. Like the way they call themselves The Company because *Cía.* is the Spanish abbreviation for company."

"Do I try Company?"

Talley wasn't being serious, but Buckmaster mused as though taking him seriously.

"Negative. Must be a *bit* more subtle. Let's see, the CIA's at Langley. L'Anglais. The Englishman. Limey? Limehouse? Try Lime and see what happens."

"Sure you want to? We can make only one slipup — two at the most — then the security people will be on to us."

"Proceed."

Talley tapped keys.

login tl lime

Response came rapidly, letters glowing on the screen.

SØRRY. PLEASE REPEAT

Talley lit up. "We're on the right track, Lieutenant. It thinks we dropped — or it lost — a letter or a syllable. Which do we try? Limey or Limehouse?"

Buckmaster wavered. Limey or Limehouse? And now that he thought of it, it could even be Blimey. No, the CIA would opt for elegance. "Limehouse."

login tl limehouse

The display cleared, making way for a number burst.

1208 37

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Buckmaster followed Talley's glance at the clock and saw it was just eight minutes and thirty-seven seconds past twelve noon.

"By God, we're in. It's logged us in. What now, Lieutenant? What do we ask for?" Talley's fingers played the air above the keys.

"Go for broke. Ask for TOTE."

tote

WARNING/WARNING - SPECAT - WARNING/WARNING

Talley locked eyes with Buckmaster. Both read that both knew SPECAT was a marking to identify information so sensitive as to require special access and safeguarding procedures. Buckmaster made himself shrug.

"We're CIA, aren't we? So we have COSMIC clearance."

Talley gave a shrug of his own, but his face was tight and shiny.

proceed

The readout manifested: virtually instantaneously.

TØTE WARNING/WARNING - SPECAT - TØP SECRET DATA TØ FØLLØW. TABULATIØN ØF TØTAL EXCHANGE KEY NAME; CALL NAME TØTE.

start read and print data

START START READ AND PRINT DATA

TØTE

UP-TØTE

print tote and up-tote

TØTE KEY NAME TABULATION ØF TØTAL EXCHANGE, ULTIMATE MINIMAX WAR GAME VIA MØLINK. THE SUPERPØWERS CAN NØ LONGER SUSTAIN A ZERØ-SUM WØRLD, NEITHER CAN THE WØRLD SUSTAIN ALL-ØUT WAR. TØTE WILL PEACEFULLY DETERMINE WHICH IS TØ RULE THE WØRLD — THE US ØR THE USSR. TØTE HAS TAKEN FØUR YEARS TØ SET UP AND WILL TAKE SIX MØNTHS TØ PLAY. ELECTRØNIC SYMBØLS REPRESENTING MISSILES, BØMBERS. DECØYS, INTERCEPTØRS, AND ELEMENTS ØF ØTHER WEAPØNS SYSTEMS, ARE ØN MAGNETIC TAPE. THE TWØ SIDES PLAY THE GAME BY FEEDING PUNCH CARDS WITH INSTRUCTIØNS INTØ THE MACHINES. FØRCES TØ BE CØMMITTED BY BØTH SIDES, ALL. TABULATIØN ØF THE SPECIFIC RESULTS WILL BE CØMPLETE BY FØUR SLASH SEVEN SLASH SEVEN SIX BUT WILL REMAIN SECRET TØ FØRESTALL UNREST AND UPRISINGS. HØWEVER, THE TWØ SIDES HAVE AGREED TØ ABIDE BY THE ØUTCØME AND WILL WØRK IN GØØD FAITH BEHIND THE SCENES TØ GIVE ALL PØWER TØ THE WINNER. END.

UP-TØTE. SITREP AS ØF FIVE SLASH FØUR SLASH SEVEN SIX STANDØFF.

END.

The glowing upper-case letters stared at them. Talley's lower-case fingers hung still, unasking. Buckmaster saw the big picture while pieces were still jiggling into place; MOLINK, for instance, was Moscow Link, the room housing the hot line. Zulu hummed to himself. Fiordaliso leaned against Buckmaster to see over his shoulder

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and seemed unaware that her voice was warm in his ear and her form salient.

"War is heck."

Buckmaster nodded absently, dully. The war room was where the action was. How disheartening to be so far away from the center and so small in the scheme of things.

Sensors outside the compound set off the taped warning and lit up the monitor. The four started: they had visitors.

22. REPCAT Report corrective action taken

One square near the perimeter, in the grid covering the compound and a half klick out on all sides, showed an M-16 whose nearness to the sensor all but blocked out its bearer, a man in Army fatigues. Another square, on the other side of the firebreak, showed another man in Army fatigues, also carrying an M-16.

Fiordaliso pressed closer to peer. "Ours?"

Buckmaster shook his head. "No insignia. But they're not Soviet regulars — that would be against the rules. They'll be sleepers rather than infiltrators." He nodded to himself. "What do you bet they'll pretend to be FTA members to make this seem an internal matter."

Zulu cocked his head. "Sounds like they're bringing up some heavy stuff."

Talley listened. "Roger. Too far away yet to pick up on the monitor."

The tower. Buckmaster wasn't ready to trust his fingers to the rungs. He showed them to Zulu. "Zulu, you just got volunteered. Climb the tower and see what we're up against."

Zulu picked up a pair of binoculars and started out on the double, stopped, grinned, kicked his slippers off, got the pair of Crushees-fitted boots from the closet and put them on. Talley stayed at the monitor; Buckmaster and Fiordaliso went to the door to watch Zulu, Buckmaster covering him with the M-16 — and, Buckmaster made sure, a full clip.

The jump tower rose in four sixteen-foot stages. Zulu flattened himself on the top platform and glassed the horizon. He fixed on a spot straight down the firebreak. His voice carried.

"They got one of those lemons — an M-551. About a klick away." Then, "Hey!"

It might be a lemon, the M-551 Sheridan armored reconnaissance assault vehicle that the sleepers had commandeered, but its gun-launcher had fired a Shillelagh eye-guide missile that gouged the tower just below the top platform and Zulu. A second shot took out the platform next below and tore away the rest of the ladder. Zulu lowered himself from the top platform, hung dangling, let go.

"Geronimo!"

Dashiki billowing, he landed in the sandbox like a crumpled butterfly. Then he stood up, with a smile of surprise. He unclamped the flattened Crushees and looked at them.

"The damn things work."

Buckmaster scowled. Zulu's mind wasn't working. Buckmaster sent a burst into the air over Zulu's head. Fiordaliso gasped. Zulu hit the dirt. He glared across at Buckmaster, then grin-

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ned sheepishly, and nodded. It takes four seconds for a man to aim and fire. Zulu made it back to the van in three-second rushes. There was no further M-16 fire, though; the enemy hadn't yet reached the compound fence.

Talley had come running to the door, .45 in hand. Fiordaliso filled him in and he holstered his weapon. He made room for Zulu to pass inside, then put a hand on Buckmaster's shoulder to hold Buckmaster and, by the weight of it, himself. He looked pale.

"I hate to agree with you, Lieutenant, but that's not the CID. Whatever they are, let's get the hell out before they surround us."

Zulu was getting the hell out of his dashiki and into insignialess fatigues. Without pausing, he nodded.

"Yeah. We got only ten minutes, fifteen minutes outside, before they do."

Buckmaster tingled. Standoff. He almost laughed. He saw Fiordaliso stare at him, and his urge to laugh deepened. He had to be out of his mind to follow his own reasoning, but the nonexistent Tenth Experimental Company could tip the balance. He had to make them see it. If there was no time for that, he had to make them follow without seeing.

"Listen up. Let them surround us. They'll be the ones in a trap. We stand them off and call in an air strike. A few gunships, a few smart bombs, and it's all over. We win TOTE for our side."

There was no almost about Talley's laugh. "You're crazy. Just the three of us?"

Fiordaliso put chest out, pulled chin in. "The four of us."

Buckmaster grasped at that. "And it's not just the four of us. It's the whole damn Tenth X. The enemy's expecting to find a whole two-hundred-man company. He won't rush us. We have time for that strike."

Talley shook his head. "You think Old Rivet Divot's going to stick his neck out on your say-so? You don't exist. The Tenth X doesn't exist." He grinned. "If he sends in a strike, it'll be to wipe out Cpl. Oscar Flugel."

"We go over his head. Talley, sit down at the keys and get through to the Joint Chiefs."

Talley didn't bother to shake his head; the negative was in his face and voice. "Even if we got through to them, would we get through to them? Time they believed us and reacted it *would* be all over. For us."

Buckmaster blocked the doorway, M-16 relaxed-looking but ready. "Sure, we could walk away ... crawl away ... and leave the Tenth X behind for the enemy to discover it's only a Potemkin village, nothing to worry about as far as TOTE's concerned. But here we have this one chance to do something big. Don't throw it away."

Talley took a step toward him. "I'm not throwing myself away. I'm above the battle. I can always make a deal."

"Swiss numbered accounts? First thing the Reds will do if they win is lean on the Swiss to hand over all assets of U.S. nationals. They'll take before you can offer to give." Buckmaster smiled tightly at Talley. "Above the battles are the vultures."

Talley's face twisted. "I remember

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Nam ... the brass in their command choppers four thousand feet above the grunts ... moving the grunts like toy soldiers. TOTE sounds like more of the same. To the brass on both sides we're electronic symbols. Pawns. And what the hell's so important about the Tenth that the fate of the world hangs on it? *Crushees*, for God's sake?"

Zulu looked up from zipping his fly. "Well, they do work."

Buckmaster's cheek twitched. Take too long to tell them about Mirrorite. "Just being an unknown factor is enough. What's so important about the Tenth is that they think it's important."

Talley took another step. "Yeah? Well, being a pawn has its redeeming features. We can pass the buck to the brass. Let them fight it out. Step aside, Lieutenant."

Zulu moved up beside Talley. "Yeah. Up your rear echelon, Buckmaster. Why should I risk my beautiful skin to help beat the Reds? To save us for the shitstorm: the breakup of America? If you want to play tin soldier, that's your weight. Me, I'm splitting."

The van went dark and humless.

"They cut the line!"

"Jump him, Zulu!"

Zulu flashed a grin. "I won't jump — got no more Crushees."

Buckmaster watched Zulu stride toward him. Swiftly he unclipped his flashlight with his free hand and pulsed it at what he hoped was ten cycles per second, near enough to the alpha rhythm to give Zulu a seizure — if a seizure was going to take at all.

"Stop it, Zulu. We're together."

But Zulu paid Fiordaliso no mind. He strode on. Then he stopped midstride, hands and feet tense, eyes wide open in the flicker, lips smacking. "Alpha is better ... alpha is better ... alpha is better...." The irrelevant phrase capped the symptoms of temporal-lobe epilepsy, and Zulu fell to the floor, frothing and writhing.

"What did you do to him?"

Buckmaster swung the flicker into Talley's eyes. "Disrupted his brain. Do the same to you if you don't shape up. Lieutenant, wad your handkerchief between Zulu's jaws so he doesn't swallow his tongue; unbutton his collar; stretch him flat. Talley, go up front to the bunks and tear up all the bedsheets into short strips."

"What for?"

"Molotov cocktails."

Talley shook his head dazedly but backed away into the dimness. Buckmaster pocketed the flashlight, looked outside.

Buckmaster slung the M-16, dashed out to the supply room, and hurried back toting cartons of Mist-Tress. On his second trip he saw a flare go up. The enemy was getting into position. Returning to the van he found Fiordaliso helping Zulu sit up.

"How's he doing?"

Zulu got up by himself and answered for himself. "Man, you really did me. How long I been out? Guess now it's too late to run? We got to stand and fight?"

"Unless you know a better hole."

Zulu's eyes flashed. "Man, I know just the spot. If I can crash through the fence at the rear, I'll drive us there."

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"I'll ride shotgun." Buckmaster turned to Fiordaliso and was glad to see she looked calmer than he felt. "Lock yourself in and get set for a rough ride. While we're on our way, you and Talley will be working. The bedsheet strips are wicks. Use knife points or fork tines to jam one end of the wick down between the valve stem and the gasket and —"

"What valve stem? What gasket?"

"Didn't I say? The hair-spray canisters are our Molotov cocktails. Knock a hole in the side of the trailer if you need light to work by. Round up all the matches and lighters and have them ready to hand out when we get there." Wherever Zulu's there was.

The door closed behind him and Zulu. Zulu moved shakily at first but quickly steadied. Buckmaster flung the camouflage off the rig and netted Zulu, who had bent to pull the plug of the umbilical. Zulu straightened and stood in momentary resignation.

"Oh, man, not again."

"C'mon, man, move. Don't you know there's a war on?"

"A war on what?"

Zulu and Buckmaster shook with silent laughter as Buckmaster helped untangle him. They hopped into the tractor cab, and Zulu pulled them away, making straight for the fence and picking up all the speed he could.

23. LRTGT Last resort target

Eyes still wet with laughter, face cold sober, Buckmaster saw again Zulu the MP sergeant and Sally Kaster rolling together in the fishnet at the FTA coffeehouse. He told himself it wasn't Mirrorite that had brought about the deaths of Sally and Joe ... and deaths yet to come. The Reds, through Maggie, had shown their deep concern about the Tenth X even before the Mirrorite put-on. But, all right, if there was self-anger in him he would vector it toward the enemy.

The enemy was now, brutal as the rig rushing the fence, and the enemy showed himself as Zulu reversed for another run at the sagging section of fence. A figure broke cover, out of the trees, and a hand pulled back to throw a grenade. Buckmaster got off a sprinkle, and the figure tore apart and the grenade exploded in free fall.

Then they were through the fence and on the straightway of the firebreak that took up again on this other end of the compound. M-16 fire followed them in futile rage.

Zulu turned west on Service Road Delta a short way and then headed across country into the vast openness of the Reservation. Buckmaster frowned.

"Just where the hell are you taking us?"

"That mother of a Vietnamese village they set up to train troops for guerrilla warfare. You know, that Nam village with its hooches and pagoda and tunnels and punji pits with the stakes smeared with shit and the booby traps and mines and graves and rice paddies. A bitch of a last ditch, man. I know the tunnels outside in. Veni, vidi, VC. We'll be Charlie."

Buckmaster stared at him. "Zulu, that's long gone. They tore that mockup down and built a Middle East Village. Preparing for a different brand of war." He busied himself trying to revis-

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ualize the village, then a speck in his rear-view mirror caught his eye even as Zulu spoke. A subdued Zulu.

"Turn back, Lieutenant? Try to make Outpost No. 1?"

"Look back."

Zulu grew more subdued. The speck was the M-551. Zulu poured it on, tried to lay her on the peg. It had to be a rougher ride in the trailer than in the tractor. The speck grew.

"They're staying right with us." Zulu looked suddenly puzzled. "Say, Lieutenant, how did the enemy locate us in the first place, anyway?"

A good question, and Buckmaster went cold with the answer. In one savage move his hand bit off and swallowed the button Maggie had sewn on. The bitch had planted a beeper on him. He shook the fist the button was in.

Zulu grinned and gave him the sign of the fist back. "That's right, loot, what the hell's the difference now. We're in it all the way."

When Zulu wasn't looking, Buckmaster slipped the button into the rear fold of the cab seat.

Zulu sat straighter. "Maybe we'll find lots of us there."

"We'll see. But don't count on it. And if they are there, how effective are their blank bullets in real house-to-house fighting? Buckmaster narrowed his eyes. "There it is, dead ahead."

"Yeah, dead."

A signpost stood at the outskirts. MEGIDDO. No one was there. And the speck was bigger.

They lost it when they turned into town. Megiddo was a stylized jumble of whitewashed mud cubes, the last big throw of dice. Buckmaster found it coming back to him.

"That way ... now left. Pull into the central market square ... into the far corner of it, so they'll have to move all the way in to get at the rig. Fine."

Before Zulu had braked the rig, Buckmaster had lit running back to the trailer door. He knocked: the door opened and he climbed in. Light stitched the walls where M-16 crossfire had pierced after the breakout from the compound. Fiordaliso was bringing a carton of wicked canisters to the door.

"We did most of them. I don't know how, or how many, or how well."

A greenish Talley followed with another carton. "What a miserable ride." He looked out and around. "Where are we?"

"Megiddo."

Talley almost dropped his carton. "Hell, we're not equipped for house-to-house."

Buckmaster took both cartons, one under each arm. "It won't be house-to-house. It'll be roof-to-ground." He jumped out and called back. "On the double with the rest."

He made sure each of the four had two cartons and matches or lighters. All four stood frozen a moment, naked under the wide square of sky, as the enemy, not yet in Megiddo but near, thought he saw something and opened up on it. Buckmaster pointed to the four corners of the square. "One of us up on each of those roofs. Keep your head down till the M-551's in the square together with all the sleepers. Then let 'em have it with everything you've got. Move!"

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Buckmaster gazed out over the roofs, away from the market square toward the way they had come. They had got into position just in time. He flattened himself. The M-551 was rolling into town.

A dozen men dropped from it and walked behind its bulk as it quested. Buckmaster found himself swinging his M-16 into line. A figure slid into the sights. A man in a chicken vest and a radio helmet. Buckmaster lowered his M-16 and wished a prayer at Zulu and Talley, though they had only .45s. Don't pick him off. The man pointed. The M-551 made for the market square.

"Take it easy. You're hyperventilating. Save your breath to pool your courage." Had he spoken aloud? Buckmaster grimaced. Follow me. Had he led the Tenth X into a deathtrap, or were the sleepers walking into one? What kind of leader did the sleepers have? Not so hot. Bad tactics to have fired those Shillelaghs at Zulu. Gave themselves away too soon. But here they came, not so bad for a scratch task force of sleepers that, it was his guess, the Reds had pulled in from all over the U.S.

The M-551 rolled into the square, its crew and the men walking behind it spraying the doorways and windows with cal-fifty and M-16 fire. It halted and its gun-launcher trained on the van. Buckmaster edged for a look. All present and accounted for? He pulled back.

He grabbed a canister, lit its wick, and arced it toward the M-551. He quickly lit another and hurled it to block escape from this side of the square. As they went off, other canisters shot from the other roofs. Thirty-meter sheets of flame fed each other and grew into a fireball.

It was all over before the enemy knew it. But one man in the M-551 died with his hands on the double handgrips of his cal-fifty rendering his death rattles. It was all over, but Buckmaster tossed canisters till he had none; the others did the same.

The world was on fire and the heat licked at him and he rolled away. Then there was silence but for the talk of hot metal and hot brick slowly cooling. He climbed down into the building and out into the square. Screams of the napalmed remained in his mind.

He didn't make a body count. He didn't think anyone could make a body count. Fire had twisted smoking flesh into mortal coils, charred fetuses. Zulu rushed out into the square, bent to a body, and tore chars of cloth from the char of flesh.

Buckmaster stiffened. "What the hell?"

Zulu looked up at him with wild eyes, and he made ready to flick his flashlight. Only, where was it? He had lost it. Then Zulu's eyes focused. Zulu slowly straightened.

"Guess I had a flashback to Nam. In Nam you stripped the VC body to keep Charlie from booby-trapping it."

Buckmaster nodded and turned away. Something not wholly burned caught his eye. Something had escaped the holocaust. He picked up a toasted fragment of a leaflet bearing the FTA logo. EATH TO THE MILITARISTIC-IMPERIALISTIC POLLUTERS

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He pocketed it. He swung around with his M-16 at the ready. Fiordaliso had come up behind him. Her eyes ignored the weapon, ignored the bodies. She looked at Buckmaster and Zulu but seemed not to see them. Her eyes were shineless, her voice toneless.

"Where's Talley?"

Buckmaster's head jerked toward Talley's building. An arc of pocks ran up the face of the building.

"I'll go see."

But Zulu beat him into the building. In a moment Zulu's head showed over the edge of the roof.

"That cal-fifty in the M-551 caught him looking over."

Buckmaster and Fiordaliso were silent till Zulu rejoined them. Zulu hawked and spat. He looked off into a distance.

"Well, it was worrying him how to end it. No more."

Buckmaster eyed himself, Fiordaliso, and Zulu. Singed and dirty. "Look at us. All we need is a flag, a fife, and a drum."

They grinned death's-head grins at each other. Then Fiordaliso gave a choking cough.

"Can't we get away from the stink?"

They started away but Zulu put out a hand and they stopped. He cocked his head.

"A chopper."

Buckmaster drew Fiordaliso back to the building line.

"Take cover. Could still be the enemy."

They hurried through a doorway and stood listening to the beat of hovering. Buckmaster edged a look.

"No, there's only the pilot. It's our own, come to see what the smoke's all about."

His mood lightened. Then he saw darkness at the end of the tunnel. Medals for some, though. Let another General Hackstaff take credit for outplaying the Reds.

"Stay under cover. When it descends a bit more, we can slip out the back."

Zulu nodded. "Yeah. No way we can talk our way out of this. And I can't see us taking the Fifth on the Tenth."

"Roger. We ease out of Megiddo and out across the fields into the woods."

Fiordaliso cocked an eye at Buckmaster. "And then?"

"Off the Reservation."

"And then?"

"Spend the money."

He looked his last at the van. It might have ended for Talley, but the Tenth was still in it, operational in the electronic eyes of TOTE. His look lasted on the burnt-out M-551 and the burnt-out bodies. War is not a game. A stinking moral in the nostrils of Fiordaliso, Zulu, and himself.

The chopper had lowered enough now: the pilot would not see them dash across the street beyond the square.

"Dive for that doorway. Now!"

They dove.

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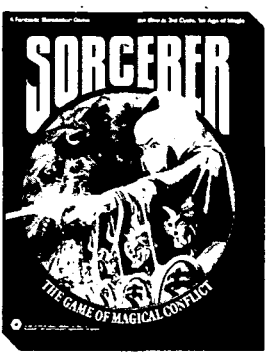

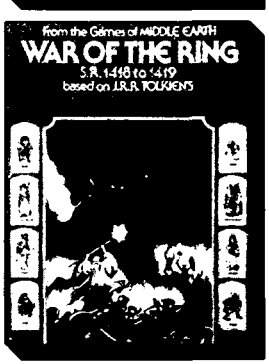

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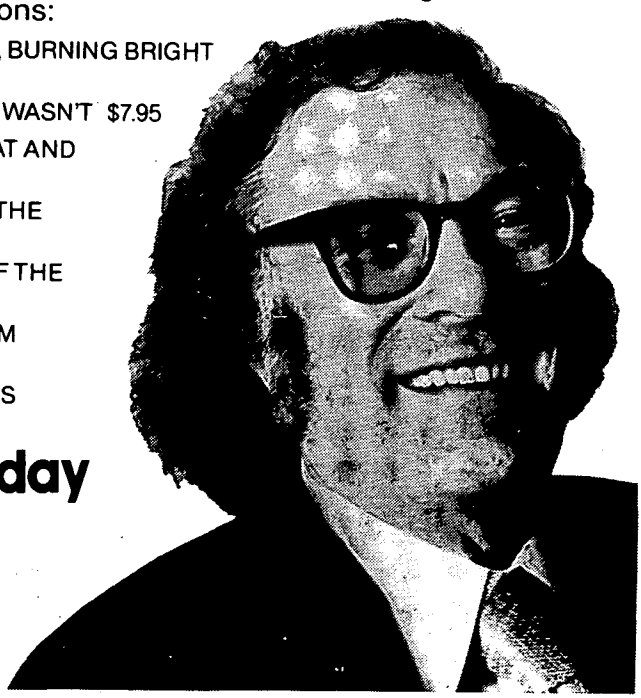

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